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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

The evolving role of philosophy within the novels of Samuel Beckett

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The Evolving Role of Philosophy within the
Novels of Samuel Beckett

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PhD

University of Dundee

December 2012

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Declaration

I hereby certify that I am the author of this thesis, that all references cited have been consulted by myself, that the work of which this thesis is a record has been undertaken by myself, and that this thesis has not been previously accepted for a higher degree.

Ryan Rushton.

Abstract

In recent years the study of Samuel Beckett's work has moved into increasingly specialised and archival areas. With the sheer wealth of work undertaken since the field began in the 1960s and the availability of previously unobtainable materials this was somewhat of an inevitability. The sub-field of "Beckett and Philosophy", into which this thesis most comfortably falls, has become so saturated with differing approaches that one might be forgiven for thinking new work which examines the core ideas guiding Beckett's writing redundant. One of the key contentions of this thesis is that owing to the resistance Beckett's novels offer to critical discourse, the task of understanding and explaining them is never complete. Based on this belief, I have attempted a new survey of the evolving place philosophy occupies within Beckett's novels, seeking not to discount approaches such as the archival work already mentioned, but to incorporate them into the fundamental question of what these books mean.

Rather than relying upon only one theoretical approach, I attempt to draw from a variety of philosophical and literary sources, in a process free enough to work with the developmental refining of Beckett's novels throughout the years. In the first chapters on his early books, *Murphy* and *Watt*, I argue they engage in a process of bricolage, bringing out their own philosophical perspectives in an illustrative manner. The middle section of the thesis looks at the four 1946 novellas and the first work of The Trilogy, *Molloy*, as representative of a shift in Beckett's writing toward modes that employ form and content symbiotically in order to respond actively to metaphysical possibilities. In the last two chapters on *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* I examine the process of reduction that leads Beckett to focus largely on form, and the consequences this may have for the achievements of previous work.

Abbreviations Used

FL - Beckett, Samuel, *First Love* (1946); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, IV (New York: Grove Press, 2006)

MD - Beckett, Samuel, *Malone Dies* (1951); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, II (New York: Grove Press, 2006)

MO - Beckett, Samuel, *Molloy* (1951); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, II (New York: Grove Press, 2006)

MU - Beckett, Samuel, *Murphy* (1938); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, I (New York: Grove Press, 2006)

TC - Beckett, Samuel, *The Calmative* (1946); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, IV (New York: Grove Press, 2006)

TE - Beckett, Samuel, *The End* (1946); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, IV (New York: Grove Press, 2006)

TEX - Beckett, Samuel, *The Expelled* (1946); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, IV (New York: Grove Press, 2006)

TU - Beckett, Samuel, *The Unnamable* (1953); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, II (New York: Grove Press, 2006)

WA - Beckett, Samuel, *Watt* (1945); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, I (New York: Grove Press, 2006)

Introduction

The genesis of this thesis arose from the responses I had reading different kinds of Beckett criticism. Essential to my own understanding of the author is the notion his novels are a hybrid of genres, including literature, philosophy, theology and critical discourse, whilst also never being fully any of these. It is largely because of this oscillating engagement with genres that critical exegesis of the works is arrested before it has even begun. For anyone who decides to write on Beckett the question that seems most pertinent to me, both at the outset and indeed throughout, is 'how does one write on Beckett?' I was fascinated to see in the history of Beckett studies the various responses to this question. Whether or not as a consequence of being the initial wave of criticism to tackle Beckett, the monographs of the 1960's tend to follow a fairly descriptive path, in which they remain on the outside, informing the reader of how the texts proceed, rather than fully engaging with them. At the opposite end of the spectrum we have critics such as Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze who feel the need to formalise Beckett through a compartmentalised structure and quasi-poetical vernacular in order to overcome this inherent critical resistance. It is very telling that so many, including myself, spend large amounts of time discussing the fact Jacques Derrida never wrote on Beckett as central to understanding the ineffability his work seems to engender. My approach however, although informed by these highly conceptual and often quite abstract thinkers, is perhaps most indebted to John Pilling's first works on Beckett from the 1970s. In books like *Samuel Beckett* (1976), which I draw on heavily within this thesis, the core focus is again a survey of what Beckett's works had achieved up to that point, yet Pilling manages to use emblematic examples to illustrate something true about the fundamental ideas the texts are informed by and work with. In this thesis, which is essentially an examination of the changing role philosophy plays in Samuel Beckett's prose, I aim to replicate Pilling's simplicity and economy of expression,

whilst still articulating the inherently complex ideas driving this oeuvre forward.

On a number of occasions I challenge John Calder's assertion that 'what future generations can expect to find in [Beckett's] work is above all an ethical and philosophical message; the novels and plays will increasingly be seen as the wrapping for that message.'¹ Whilst Calder's position here is clearly an oversimplification, illustrated by the kinds of readings I will examine in the thesis, his position is perhaps emblematic of a pitfall that work which deals with Beckett and philosophy must avoid. I take issue with Calder's understanding because it is reductive. It robs Beckett's work of artistic merit and renders it inert; a dry series of philosophical propositions that need a fictional shell for the sake of palatability. I would argue that above all Beckett is an artist, obsessed with the capabilities and limitations of the media he worked in, and compelled to create. This is, after all, why he chose to write plays, novels, poetry, screenplays, radio scripts, and not philosophical treatises. It will be a key contention throughout that philosophy, especially the Western metaphysical tradition is, for Beckett, fundamentally flawed, and must be dismantled so as to glean a new mode of harnessing ideas. The vagueness of this notion is due to its unknown quantity. Beckett understood the fundamental flaws inherent in the history of philosophical speculation and the tools used for the purpose, and yet what would come after these modes, what would replace them, he was unsure of. In a letter to Axel Kaun Beckett speaks candidly about the role of the modern writer and what he or she should be doing with language. He writes,

As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.²

There is a strange and seemingly contradictory approach to language here that we will see

¹ John Calder, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder Publications, 2001), p. 1.

² Samuel Beckett, 'German Letter of 1937' in *Disjecta* (London: John Calder, 1983), p. 172.

throughout the works. Beckett does not want language to 'fall into disrepute' as he puts it, and yet he believes it needs to be at least partially destroyed. In this attitude we can see how Beckett believes language needs to be opened up and examined through language. Yet, his belief is that the way to achieve this is through an exactitude and employment of it in areas outwith the strictly descriptive. The leaving nothing undone he writes of speaks volumes about the process of reduction and negation which comes to be the heart of these novels and propels them forwards towards the final narrative spiralling of *The Unnameable*; a book so precise and tightly-wound that there is nothing left undone, yet everything is left open, continuous or deferred. It is therefore with a degree of sympathy one can look at Calder's position. In spite of my arguing Beckett's works are first and foremost imaginative exercises, I will also show how they are inextricably tied up with fundamental ideas on existence itself, and they reflect, and act upon, the Western metaphysical tradition.

As well as a writer, Beckett was a scholar, classically educated at Trinity College, Dublin and briefly taking up a lecturing post there before becoming disillusioned. Even after this he continued to further his education with self-directed research into new fields of philosophy, art and literature. In the lead up to the Second World War he had undertaken a tour of German galleries, seeing first-hand not only some of the finest works German artists had produced, but also the early stages of Nazi censorship, with works by Jewish artists removed from view and put into storage. Similarly he became interested in learning more on neglected figures within the philosophical tradition and went back to Trinity College library intent on reading one of the few copies in existence of Arnold Geulincx's *Ethics* (1665). By the time he came to write his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), he already had accumulated a personal history of philosophy, literature and

art he was ready to engage with and contest. As we deal with the evolution of these novels what will become clear is that, based on this selected history of ideas, Beckett focused upon a revolving and intertwined set of themes designed to challenge the inescapability of affirmative metaphysical speculation. As Beckett scholarship moves further into archival areas one could be forgiven for thinking that the fundamental, philosophical questions these work raise have perhaps been resolved. I seek to re-enter certain theoretical debates about the broadest meaning of these novels, working from critical approaches such as Matthew Feldman's, Shane Weller's and Daniel Katz's, but establishing my own position and in doing so hopefully highlighting previously neglected or marginalised aspects of these works.

Dream of Fair to Middling Women has been omitted from this thesis, which aims to be fairly comprehensive about the character of Beckett's novels. The earlier works are renowned for their overly erudite vocabulary and the vast quantity of allusions in the text. However, I would argue that it was only with the writing of *Murphy* (1938) that Beckett began to truly engage with, rather than merely reiterate, his influences. I will suggest that *Murphy* and *Watt* (1945) represent the first phase of the prose writing, captured in Derrida's conception of bricolage, in which Beckett attempts to reflect a multitude of ideas and illustrate through the form and content of the works a response to these ideas. Following this, there is a chapter on the four 1946 novellas Beckett wrote in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Again, why write on these works and not the full-length novel *Mercier and Camier* (1946), composed in the same year? As I argue in the chapter itself, for the purposes of tracing the specific evolution of ideas and methodology, this thesis focuses upon the novellas as bridging works; they contain remnants of *Murphy* and *Watt*, but also establish thematic and formal elements that will become recognisable Beckettian

tropes in *The Trilogy* (1951-1953). I argue that *Mercier and Camier* on the other hand is equally an establishing force, but for Beckett's drama, not his prose. In the relationship between the two characters we find what Badiou referred to as THE TWO in Beckett's works³, most famously offered in pieces like *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1957) and *Happy Days* (1961). Following this chapter on the novellas, are three chapters on Beckett's renowned trilogy of novels. Beginning with *Molloy* (1951), I seek to define a shift in Beckett's writing to a form which combines accessibility with new conceptual depth, and marries the aforementioned illustrative method in the prose, with a new enacting mode. This is continued through *Malone Dies* (1951) and *The Unnamable* (1953). The latter aspects of these combinations comes to greater prominence, and the resulting ambiguity over their status as philosophical novels becomes a central concern. Beckett's final novel *How It Is* (1961) is absent from my discussion, but I would claim that the evolutionary leaps between his earlier prose works are on a much smaller scale at this juncture, and do not require a further chapter in the broad scope of this thesis.

This evolving conceptual framework also illustrates why there is still work to be done in terms of our understanding of these books. As I mentioned, in recent years there have been moves in Beckett studies towards highly specialised areas of interest. Last year's international conference 'Samuel Beckett: Out of the Archive'⁴ illustrated just how far Beckett studies has come from isolated textual analysis of the published editions in the mode pursued by the initial wave of the 1960s and 70s. Ground-breaking works by authors such as John Pilling, Ruby Cohn and Hugh Kenner directly addressed the larger questions of what Beckett's writing was and what it meant. This is not in any way a criticism of archival studies, which is helping us understand the minutiae of Beckett's works in

³ Alain Badiou, *On Beckett* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), p. 28.

⁴ Held at the University of York between June 23-26, 2011. <<http://www.outofthearchive.com/>> [Accessed 30 December, 2012]

previously impossible ways, and indeed correcting many erroneous assumptions previously held. Similarly, “Beckett and Philosophy”, which has become an entire sub-field of Beckett studies often offers very specific readings of the works alongside the writing of one or two select philosophers. Again, I do not wish to contest the legitimacy of this approach, and it is indeed testament to how rich and vast these works remain long after their publication. However, I do not think this means there is nothing left to be done in terms of these broader approaches which so dominated early Beckett studies. Indeed, much of the work undertaken by Matthew Feldman aims to reassess what we assume we know about the larger philosophical influences, based on his archival research. In particular, the strides he has made in recent years towards establishing Fritz Mauthner as a central figure within Beckett's spheres of influence show us that, even now, our perceptions of the man and the works cannot be considered complete.

As I said, this is owing to the nature of Beckett's work. Another central figure in this thesis will be Jacques Derrida and key to understanding how I have approached the novels are some answers he gave during a now famous interview by Derek Attridge. In this interview Derrida claims that he could deconstruct a writer as complex as James Joyce from a mere two words, as he of course did in his essay 'Two Words for Joyce', but could never even attempt the same with Beckett. In the following exchange the problem with Beckett is summarised:

D.A.: Is there a sense in which Beckett's writing is already so “deconstructive,” or “self-deconstructive,” that there is not much left to do?

J.D.: No doubt that's true... Above all, this question should not be treated as a philosophical problem outside or above the texts. When I found myself, with students, reading some Beckett texts, I would take three lines, I would spend two hours on them, then I would give up because it would not have been possible, or honest, or even interesting, to extract a few “significant” lines from a Beckett text.⁵

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 61.

The complexities of Beckett's works deconstructing themselves is handled in the final chapter of this thesis and will not be addressed here. However, what this question and answer highlight is the degree to which these works arrest the critic and render analysis, at least in terms of traditional close or historical readings for example, somewhat redundant. As Derrida points out, the notion that we should or can approach the inherent philosophical issues contained within these novels from an objective, removed perspective is an illusion. As these novels progress they become increasingly engagements with the fundamental structural base underpinning the kinds of readings one could attempt with a more conventional author. The following point on *Molloy* from the Longman Critical Readers volume on Samuel Beckett may hold true for the entire oeuvre:

A critical discourse with pretensions to master the text, to assimilate it to its own preoccupations, will find on engaging with Beckett's textuality that it cannot be master, and is itself 'held' (and at least partially assimilated) by the work it aimed to hold.⁶

These works fundamentally challenge critical discourse by anticipating and playing with many of the prerequisites that determine its function. In terms of Beckett studies the question of how one can even successfully write on Beckett has always been the greatest obstacle, but also quite often the most fruitful of avenues.⁷ Some of the most incisive and lasting Beckett criticism has approached the author in innovative ways, not in order to surmount a problem, but to work with the text and get the most from it. A perfect example of this is Badiou, who in *On Beckett* (2003) writes in a non-traditional, abstracted and, as I mentioned, almost poetic style. In short, the fact remains that because of the impossibility of mastering the texts there always remains more to be said, even on the most established

⁶ *Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Jennifer Birkett and Kate Ince (London: Longman, 2000), p. 28.

⁷ An issue Robert Eaglestone fruitfully explores in 'Beckett in the Wilderness: Writing about (Not) Writing about Beckett' in *Beckett and Philosophy*. He writes 'I will suggest that thinking about Beckett's work highlights problems in 'thinking about literature' (a field broader than 'English', perhaps: 'literature science' or 'thinking about literature?'). This means that thinking about Beckett's work is a very useful way to judge the capability for crisis of 'thinking about literature' and so, in turn, judge its 'real movement'. This is not because I think that work by Beckett is a unique case – any more than any work of literature is unique or not unique – but because his works do clearly test the limits of our ideas about what literature is and what the foundations of 'thinking about literature' should be.' Robert Eaglestone, 'Beckett in the Wilderness: Writing about (Not) Writing about Beckett' in *Beckett and Philosophy* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 41.

and fundamental questions under discussion here.

Dealing as I am with multiple works spanning most of Beckett's prose career, my own methodology is not fixed in terms of arguing for the influence of a particular philosopher or philosophical school within the works. I also do not attempt a conceptual reading based upon an established schema. Rather, as these works evolve so will my approach, initially looking at much of the content of the work, before shifting to a focus more on the interaction of form and content, and finally almost exclusively the form itself as the content becomes stabilised. The issue with such a broad approach is that one can risk falling into overview and describing what the works are doing, rather than engaging with them. It is my hope that by pinpointing specific emblematic examples from these works I can say something particular, but also more general about what these works are doing in terms of their philosophical reactions.

In chapter 1, '*Murphy* – Philosophical Bricolage', I argue that Beckett engages in an overt form of bricolage, writing a novel which engages with a variety of sources and through this engagement offers illustrative assertions of its own, regarding their validity. I begin by focussing upon Beckett's suggestion that the key to understanding *Murphy* was through a combination of Geulincx's '*Ubi nihil vales [,] ibi [etiam] nihil velis* (position) [where you are worth nothing, you will wish for nothing] and Malraux's *Il est difficile à celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les siens* (negation). [It is hard for someone who lives outside society not to seek out his own].¹⁸ I suggest that in this we can see how it was Beckett's method to take individual ideas or concepts from an author or work and not necessarily subscribe to the entire source. The rest of the chapter seeks to show how this is

¹⁸ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 219. The translations and other additions within brackets in this quotation are from Knowlson himself.

implemented in the novel with a discussion of the centrality of Cartesian rationalism to the work, leading from an analysis of the roots of Geulincx's part of the quotation. From there I move on to an examination of *Murphy's* status as comic novel and the critique of rationalism this provides. The next section looks at the inclusion of astrology as one of the central mechanisms determining Murphy's actions and spurring the novel forward. Again, I argue that Beckett most likely did not find any validity in the practice, but rather that he uses it in the novel as a kind of replacement metaphysics; an illustration of the inherent failures in any fixed philosophical system and the suggestion one may as well look to the stars to guide one's thinking. Returning to Geulincx more heavily in the next section I look at the mind-body problem addressed again and again in philosophy and which informs the central thematic concern of the novel. I argue that Murphy is emblematic of what happens when one tries to apply abstract metaphysics to life, living as much within the confines of one's mind as possible. I then look at Schopenhauer and how he and Beckett share a convergence of thought in this area, with the philosopher bringing out the darker side of *Murphy*, namely that because of the impossibility of living exclusively in a loftier, abstracted way it would be better for us not to have existed at all. The final part of the chapter attempts to debunk any notion that 'section six', which is to say the frequently alluded to coda toward the end of the novel, has the revelatory significance one may be tempted to grant it. I argue that despite the apparent claims it makes to offer us a true insight into the inner workings of Murphy's mind, what it actually offers is simply a picture of how Murphy conceived it. In this sense then it is simply a reaffirmation of what the novel illustrates, namely the impossibility of knowing and existing in the mind, abstracted from the realities of the body.

Chapter 2, '*Watt* and the Limits of Language', posits this next novel as an evolution of

Beckett's prose; a more sustained and focused critique of metaphysical possibilities and specifically the failure of language. Again I invoke the idea of Beckett as the bricoleur and the centrality of ineffability to *Watt* as highlighted in Matthew Feldman's recent reconfiguring of Beckett as a Mauthnerian, as well as a student of Geulincx, in these early works. I next look at how *Watt* marks the beginning of a greater commitment to using the form of the work symbiotically with its content in order to further Beckett's illustrative means, looking at the framing chapters and coda of the novel in particular. I argue that these work in conjunction with choices over content such as extended descriptions of frogs croaking, and that they have an "antifictional" purpose, which calls into question what the novel can achieve, and more generally if affirmation is even possible. I then attempt to examine the validity of the idea *Watt* has a specific target in the contemporaneous philosophical movement of 'logical positivism.' This movement, which claimed reality to be essentially linguistic and the truth of language exclusively related to what could be empirically observed, does seem to be the exact type of thinking *Watt* attempts to discredit. I next look at the overtly physical and often purposely disgusting aspects of the novel, which highlight, much as in *Murphy*, the limitations of structuralist thinking when faced with the realities of living. I argue there is a direct critique of unquestioning faith in language and structure in the creature Watt becomes once institutionalised. The final section of this chapter looks at the place of religion within the novel. I argue that *Watt* is possibly Beckett's most overt critiquing of religion, using more allegorical means than we had seen before. I look at the structure of Watt's journey as a kind of pilgrimage and in particular the relationship between the narrator Sam and Watt in the post-lapsarian Garden of Eden at the institution. I also look at the influence of Dante in the purgatorial allusions within the work and conceive of the novel as taking place in a kind of secular purgatory; a world of endless unknowability we all must face. The conclusion of the chapter asks to

what extent the aspects examined allow us to see *Watt* as proto-poststructuralist, and indeed as laying the foundations for a further commitment to this type of thinking in later works.

The third chapter, 'Reassessing the 1946 Novellas', seeks to trace the evolution of Beckett's prose writing outwith the full length novels, instead turning to these shorter works. I argue that in them we can see the establishment of some key Beckettian concerns which will be central to The Trilogy of novels to come. I begin by discussing the unavoidable presence of death in these stories and the shift from younger narrators to the decrepit, geriatric protagonists who will become the Beckettian archetype. One of the key propositions guiding this chapter is Kierkegaard's assertion that because death is unknowable, when we speak of it all we truly do is reflect what we believe about our own living existence. I argue that this is true of the stories; that they represent characters who may already be dead, but that this is illustrative of the state of ignorance we truly occupy whilst alive, with true knowledge of life or death equally unknowable. The next section focuses on the decaying bodies of these characters, with Beckett offering extended descriptions of the most base and distasteful of their physical degradations. I argue that in many ways these are assaults on the notion of intelligibility, of trying to offer something lofty and abstracted. Beckett seems to suggest that the most we can expect from the world is the opposite: the crude eliminations and increasing decrepitude of the body. The next section returns to Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (1308-1321), discussed briefly in the previous chapter. Here I contend that Beckett invokes some of Dante's hellish and purgatorial imagery, again reflecting the nightmarish conditions of damnation onto life thereby suggesting they are the only reality we can know. I next look at the theme of love, most explicitly brought out in *First Love* (1946), the only story to have a younger narrator. In this story the traditional hierarchy of love with the purest forms dedicated to wisdom or God are mocked by the

again overtly physical and seemingly arbitrary relationship of the narrator and his partner. I then turn to the other three novellas and examine how it is the absence of love that is the tragedy of these men; not in the sense they don't have partners, but that they cannot love themselves as a consequence of their crippling awareness of unknowability, the very same thing that destroyed Watt in the latter stages of that novel. I conclude the chapter by speaking of exile, which features literally in the novellas with two of the protagonists being evicted and forced to find new lodgings. This is related to Beckett's own self-imposed exile, to the removal from the fraternity of one's countrymen, and to the impossibility of surmounting or ignoring the burden of awareness that any true knowledge of one's self is impossible.

In chapter 4, '*Molloy* – An Endpoint in Beckett's Prose', the themes that are firmly established in the novellas are further refined and modified through evolutions in form and content. I begin by discussing the first-person narration in *Molloy*, the first of his full-length novels to work in this mode. I argue that Beckett takes stream-of-consciousness narration, which had featured heavily in modernist influences like Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and uses it to better convey the hopeless lack of understanding his characters feel. I draw on Gilles Deleuze's formalising of Beckett's different types of language and show how his notion of the combinatorial, which is to say 'the art or science of exhausting the possible through inclusive disjunctions'⁹, shows how the method of using these sprawling, clause-laden sentences is in fact as important as what is actually being said. The disintegration of Moran's (the novel's other principal character) narrative from functional, brief sentences into the combinatorial narration of *Molloy* mirrors the lack of understanding the two men feel; the central point of the first-person mode. The next section looks at *Molloy* as the

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', in *Essays Critical and Cultural*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), p. 154.

archetype honed from the various narrators of previous novels and most directly from the 1946 novellas. The character is shown as the most evolved form we have yet seen of a being whose every action, thought and word is a farcical critiquing of specific targets like rationalist thought, but also of structuralist thinking more generally. I look to examples such as the rotation of Molloy's sucking stones before dealing directly with what kind of comedy this is and how Beckett uses the generic framework for his own purposes. Relocating issues of existence and ineffability to modes of the ridiculous strips them of a preordained authority and allows for new ways of seeing them. Beckett equally unsettles the genre itself by swiftly moving within comedic moments into areas of unexpected or unprovoked violence. I next look at how Steven Connor argues that we should be more concerned than we previously were with time in *Molloy*. I argue that despite the twin narratives of the novel being written in the past tense, there is a strange fluid invoking of the present, as if events and ideas invade and overwhelm. Again we find, mirroring Moran's mental collapse, a slide into Molloy's understanding of time. The final section focuses on language itself and looks at the collective purpose behind the modes and themes I examine in the chapter.

The penultimate chapter of the thesis, 'Overcoming an Impasse in *Malone Dies*?', questions where Beckett has left to go if in *Molloy* he had found a marriage of form and content crystallised into a seemingly ideal realisation of his concerns. I begin by discussing the somewhat relegated place this middle work of The Trilogy occupies as the bridge between the accessible *Molloy* and the experimental *The Unnamable*. I concede that in many respects *Malone Dies* has thematic concerns expressed in previous works, but contend that a new focus on storytelling and narrative shifts our perception of these themes and is a fertile area for discussion. I begin by looking at a new self-conscious attempt of this

narrator to tell not simply his own life story, but stories more generally. In effect we have three parallel narratives with the first being Malone in his hospital bed, the second the semi-autobiographical stories of Sapo and Macmann and lastly Malone's endless metafictional interruptions into these stories. I argue these interruptions suggest, like ripples moving out from a break in water, a questioning of narrative, a questioning of language and finally a questioning of affirmation generally. I argue this is a prescient example of Derridean freeplay, with the novel lifting all narrative layers off a hierarchical base and into a free exchange. In the following section, on the shift in the presentation of death to include images of birth, I argue that Beckett has moved from a purely critical mode to one that tries to create a new aporetic space beyond the imprisoning structural restrictions the novels had sought to escape. This is shown as also being invested in a new kind of intratextuality that emphasizes Malone as the last in a series of characters, a closing off of many of the observational tools these provided, again in favour of something more open. The final section of this chapter focuses on a new kind of violence in the work, looking at the arbitrary attacks inflicted by the nurse Lemuel and the novel's subsequent conclusion. I end by asking what the bleeding of this violence into a stuttering failure in the form of the work means.

The final chapter of the thesis, 'Narrative Method and Deconstruction in *The Unnamable*', looks more directly at an issue the previous chapters tackled only partially. The evolution of Beckett's prose by the time of this last work in The Trilogy has reached a point where he is not merely using illustrative methods to critique philosophy, but is using the text itself as an active form of response. With so many of these active modes being akin to poststructuralist, and specifically deconstructionist methods, I ask if *The Unnamable* is in fact a “deconstructionist novel” and if such a thing is even possible. The chapter then

examines exemplary and mostly formal aspects of the work, comparing them to selections from Jacques Derrida's seminal lecture 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences' (1966). I begin by looking again at Derrida's own assertion he could never find a way to deconstruct Beckett because the texts deconstruct themselves, and further that the way we can align a novelist with a movement as various as deconstruction is not through manifesto, but through method. I first argue that the novel is both the culmination and the untelling¹⁰ of the evolutionary process traced through the previous works; but that in this, it presents us with a character who occupies a literal centre with past protagonists revolving around him. This is of course problematic if we are trying to align the novel with a movement that is a debunking of structural thinking founded on a centre-proximity relationship.¹¹ However, I go on to discuss how the rest of the novel does not follow this descriptive path and uses the more overt storytelling we saw in *Malone Dies*. As we shift to the interior and the strange memoir of first Sapo and then Macmann the narrative mode of the novel shifts dramatically. Dispensing entirely with breaks of any kind the text becomes one sprawling, unruly paragraph, shifting in and out of ideas and snippets of story in an exaggerated form of Molloy's speech. I try to show how this enacts a prototypical version of the deconstructionist idea of the chain of signification; an endless stream of language used as replacement for the possibility of full presence. I then examine the potential effect this mode of what Deleuze called 'blendable flows'¹² can have on not only the impetus of this novel, but on the novels as a whole. By removing all space to breathe within the text, is Beckett moving toward a mode which suffocates affirmation

10 This is a term explored in the chapter itself but which essentially comes to represent that pinnacle of a process, that presents a problem in its execution, namely that it could be said to undo and replace all previous effects which lead to its conclusion.

11 Again, this is a concept that will be explored further in the chapter, but which is fundamental to poststructuralist understandings. Essentially it is the notion that the assumption structures have a hierarchical relationship within their elements is flawed and that their true nature lies in a far more open interchange in which there is no centre, in which everything exists on the margins.

12 Gilles Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', in *Essays Critical and Cultural*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), p. 156.

entirely, to embrace a relinquishing silence? If so, then the question that remains is whether this silence manages to contain all that the previous novels have achieved? Does this silence tell and untell all that came before or does it become for most readers simply a meaningless silence, devoid of context? The chapter then moves on to how this purposeful loss of control, this zenith of abandonment could be seen as a positive force, in much the same way deconstruction's apparently critical nature could be said in its method to open up possibilities, rather than closing them off. I again invoke the idea of play, and conceive of the sprawling narrative method as containing meaning both in terms of its content as well as in its playful form, which aspires to a structure beyond the binary of absence and presence. The final section of the chapter asks whether in traversing the experimental distance from the early works, a novel like *The Unnamable* is an endpoint capable of containing the philosophical reactions of past works, and offering a response intelligible to anyone outside a limited circle of interested parties.

Throughout the thesis I use The Grove Centenary Editions of Samuel Beckett, which collects most of his work in four volumes. As Beckett translated his own writing and took a very hands-on approach to its final presentation there was no need to debate which editions were most appropriate, but since the Grove Editions have a uniformity and were published as recently as 2006 they were the most logical. As it is my intention to balance the complexities of these works with a transparent and accessible analysis I should reiterate the central issues of this thesis. These are, firstly, the evolving relationship between philosophy and literature in each subsequent prose work. Secondly, my desire not to surmount Beckett's challenge to critical exegesis, but rather, to find a methodology which works with the texts and elucidates their nature most clearly. Lastly, my hope to avoid the pitfalls of a criticism which either falls into bland overview, or equally dangerously,

mirrors the cyclically disorientating patterns Beckett's own writing engenders. I seek to illustrate, at various points, what criticism may hope to achieve in the face of an oeuvre as critically and philosophically engaged as this. Bearing these questions in mind, I begin by turning to the melting pot of ideas that is *Murphy*.

Chapter One:

Murphy - Philosophical Bricolage

In the course of Samuel Beckett's life and career the genesis of his second novel *Murphy* was attended by personal upheaval and change. Deeply affected by the death of his father and plagued by physical symptoms of a clearly psychological condition, he was advised by his friend and doctor Geoffrey Thompson to undergo psychoanalysis. However, owing to the Catholic Church's opposition, the practice was illegal in Ireland, so shortly after Christmas 1933 Beckett arrived in London for a near two-year stay. Here he met regularly with his assigned psychotherapist Dr Wilfred Ruprecht Bion as well as educating himself further in literature, music, art and indeed psychoanalysis. He absorbed a series of experiences to be worked directly into his new novel, 'begun at 34 Gertrude Street [Beckett's second London residence] on 20 August 1935.'¹³

This was eventually completed upon returning to his childhood home of Cooldrinagh, but it took a further two years to find a publisher willing to accept a difficult novel by a writer who had as yet very little in print. Despite his family's hostility toward the stories in *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934), and indifference to his more recent collection of poems, *Echo's Bones and other Precipitates* (1935), Beckett was driven to complete *Murphy*. Much like *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* it is, certainly compared to the post-war work, the kind of personal novel many young writers must get out of their system before looking outwards and engaging with the world. Again, as with *Dream*, the experiences of the writer are transformed by conflation with many of the artistic and intellectual influences he was encountering at the time. However, unlike *Dream*, Beckett's new novel rejected the rhetorical flourishes and cultural allusions that so defined the earlier work. These moved

¹³ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 203.

from littering every page of the text to more sporadic appearances as Beckett sought to find his niche, processing his history of ideas and art in a way distinct from the ubiquitous legacy of high modernism.

If we are to begin plotting the trajectory of Beckett's oeuvre then it is essential we bear in mind this oft quoted, highly important admission:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.¹⁴

Beckett's candid admission should not be underestimated. Yet viewing it in the context of his prose, it would be foolhardy to try to pinpoint the moment we can see this realisation implemented. It is essential to take into account the refining, evolutionary process within Beckett's works; each subsequent novel is a more precise distillation of ideas I will examine as a developmental philosophical engagement. Not only will we see Beckett's novels respond to a history of philosophy through which they will form their own responses, but as the works progress early books like *Murphy* and *Watt* will be built upon to form novels which present the question of when a work of fiction can become an enacted philosophy.

I will consider *Murphy*, as indeed I am going to look at all of his work up to *Molloy*, as transitional in a multitude of ways. These include shifts in the amount of personal experience we can find directly in the works, the dwindling of their reliance upon rhetorical and referential flourishes, and the employment of comedic and realist genres through to the shell of the detective genre we find in the first work of The Trilogy. From one novel to the next Beckett retains many of his concerns, but he deploys them in

¹⁴ *Damned to Fame*, p. 134.

radically different uses of form and content. One could be tempted, when examining this body of work in the established and saturated “Beckett and Philosophy” field, to see it as moving inevitably towards some fixed conclusion. One might say that as Beckett worked through the metaphysical traditions with each book, his own philosophical position became more defined, as did the tools used to render it. There is some truth in this. But this neat and convenient idea does not represent the whole truth, and often fails to take into account the complexities attending a body of work as conceptually rich as Beckett’s. Bearing this in mind, as we look at the various philosophers and principles *Murphy* plays with, is essential to understanding Beckett’s often ambiguous, and rarely fixed, relationship with them.

In Derrida's seminal 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' he discusses Levi-Strauss's concept of the bricoleur as part of his attempt to debunk the logocentric understanding of language that has been the base for centuries of Western thought. He describes how one might use

the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous -- and so forth.¹⁵

According to Levi-Strauss this is in contrast to the engineer who 'should be one to construct the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon.'¹⁶ But for Derrida, the engineer is a myth, all discourse is an amalgamation of imperfect previous forms, and we are all bricoleurs performing bricolage.¹⁷

15 Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 360.

16 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences', p. 360.

17 Derrida explains: 'If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*. The engineer, whom Levi-Strauss opposes to the *bricoleur*, should be one to construct the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon. In this sense the engineer is a myth. A subject who would supposedly be the absolute origin of his own discourse and would supposedly construct it "out of nothing," "out of whole cloth," would

We will see in Beckett's postwar work that his more homogeneous approach in terms of content and form appears repeatedly in a subtle, developmental process. If we agree with Derrida's assessment that when it comes to working with language there can be no original invention, only a process of intake and output spanning the entire history of ideas, then Beckett's works are uniformly bricolage. However, it seems clear that works such as *Murphy* and *Watt* are *overtly* bricolage. They do not subscribe to one fixed position, but consciously borrow from a variety of sources and offer a text that shifts on the base of its influences. This is the process Beckett uses in these early works, and it will be the method of this chapter to examine some of the recurring and key elements of this process, aiming at unpacking what this flagrant bricolage reveals about Beckett's own philosophical perspective. Furthermore, the notion of bricolage need not be confined to what traces we can find in the novel. As well as the influences bleeding into the text, we also have a crosscurrent of thinking with philosophers such as Derrida, whose work Beckett's pre-dates. As in this case of bricolage these understandings can often be the most effective way to articulate the essence of the novel. The aim is to discern if a clear philosophical position emerges as we take this bricolage apart and see what holds it together.

Murphy is Beckett's second attempt at a novel and as one can see from the various forms of correspondence and biographical information now available it was a tortured process that seemed to drain the life from its author. In a series of letters to his good friend and mentor Thomas McGreevy we can chart the book's conception, writing and publication

be the creator of *verbe*, the *verbe* itself. The notion of the engineer who had supposedly broken with all forms of *bricolage* is therefore a theological idea; and since Levi-Strauss tells us elsewhere that *bricolage* is mythopoetic, the odds are that the engineer is a myth produced by the *bricoleur*. From the moment that we cease to believe in such an engineer and in a discourse breaking with the received historical discourse, as soon as it is admitted that every finite discourse is bound by a certain *bricolage*, and that the engineer and the scientist are also species of *bricoleurs* then the very idea of *bricolage* is menaced and the difference in which it took on its meaning decomposes.' 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences', pp. 360-361.

woes. Typically self-deprecating, Beckett informs McGreevy:

I have been forcing myself to keep at the book, & it crawls forward. I have done about 9000 words. It is poor stuff and I have no interest in it.¹⁸

It is not necessary to take Beckett's sentiment too seriously here (he was disparaging about nearly all his work). Yet it is certainly relevant to the picture of an author in transition we have already spoken of. This is a work whose every movement is ambivalent: belonging to a comic tradition, it is also in many ways an "anti-novel" dispensing with precedent; relying on Western metaphysics for subject matter, it debunks and mocks this source in search of a new philosophical end; filled with echoes of advanced education and learning, it roots around in the baser elements of life. These are just some of the polarities *Murphy* shifts between, often changing position within the break of a paragraph, or most often showing an aversion to the definitive completely.

Descartes and the Legacy of Rationalism

The abstract and philosophical nature of the book is self-evident, confirmed by its content and form, as well as authorial testimony. Notoriously reticent about his work, Beckett would sidestep questions from journalists eager to know exactly who or what Godot was. Yet in a time before fame and the hunger for explication, Beckett's personal interactions have a frankness typical of the young, unsure writer. Again writing to his confidant McGreevy, Beckett describes the following epiphany on the nature of his book:

I shall have to go into TCD after Geulincx, as he does not exist in National Library. I suddenly see that *Murphy* is [a] break down between his: *Ubi nihil vales [,] ibi [etiam] nihil velis* (position) [where you are worth nothing, you will wish for nothing] and Malraux's *Il est difficile à celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les siens* (negation). [It is hard for someone who lives outside society not to seek out his own].¹⁹

Here, Beckett understands the nature of this novel as a 'break down' between philosophical

¹⁸ Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 277.

¹⁹ *Damned to Fame*, p. 219. The translations and other additions within brackets in this quotation are from Knowlson himself. As further proof of Beckett as bricoleur, Knowlson also notes 'he did not finish the entire book...' *Damned to Fame*, p. 219. This is not a writer engaging in a rigorous philosophical debate, but someone who looks for works that oppose, support and augment his evolving position.

positions, not whole-hearted endorsement of a particular philosophy or indeed philosopher. It is useful to think of these early works as Beckett filleting very specific aspects of various philosophies, theologies and literary approaches and including them in books like *Murphy*. This is sometimes because Beckett seems to find congruence with the aspect, or often because he wishes to respond to it through fiction, but always we can see in these inclusions not necessarily the emergence something as fixed as a philosophical position, but certainly the beginnings of a methodology. As in the last quotation one can ascertain that a post-Cartesian position is central to the book, coupled with a personal examination of the conflicted dualism of one's inner life and interactions with the world. Many have assumed that, because these philosophers, positions, and traditions feature in the work, they are supported by Beckett. But although engaging with thinkers such as Geulincx, Jung, and Malraux, Beckett does not by simple extension agree with the entirety of their thought, something I shall show as played out in the content of the work. It is also worth noting that whilst this is a revealing assessment of *Murphy* it is certainly not all-encompassing or definitive, and in fact can be seen to be more about the method of the book, than its end. This is something we shall return to later.

However, before we get to the conclusions the book reaches it is worth going back to the first thinker Beckett cites. Geulincx is somewhat unfamiliar to most. This lost seventeenth century occasionalist is one of several philosophers who followed up the rationalism of Descartes, expanding upon and modifying his principles to forge original work. There are therefore many similarities and differences between the two, with Beckett most interested in the latter. Before inquiring how Geulincx feeds into *Murphy*, we need first to consider Descartes' influence.

Descartes was a very early interest of Beckett.²⁰ His first published work was a poem entitled *Whoroscope* (1930), based upon the life and philosophy of the Frenchman. In this poem Beckett manages to comment on Descartes' philosophy through seemingly trivial details of the man's idiosyncrasies and life. For example, there is a running joke about an omelette being offered to the philosopher, and his declining it, saying it can be given to his student Gillot. This is a reference to a real life obsession with eating eggs that had 'hatched from eight to ten days; shorter or longer under the hen and the result, he says, is disgusting.'²¹ Knowledgeable about the philosopher to an encyclopaedic level, the poem presents the detritus of his life. These minutiae expand outwards from their apparent trivialities. Repetition of the joke and Descartes' insistence on the eggs' age renders him a somewhat obsessed figure with a detached commitment to the quotidian. This is supported by the descriptions of his skirmishes with contemporary philosophers, which are worked into the poem, alongside more serious issues relating to his daughter's death, and his visions. The whole piece is in the first person, and in this mode his speech moves at a fervent pace, anticipating that of Beckett's later protagonists, in particular Molloy. The comedy is not satiric, or intended to discredit Cartesianism. It is a whimsical series of playful quips about a philosopher who engaged the youthful Beckett.

In *Murphy* we see a return to Descartes' life and philosophy, and once again, the eschewing of a didactic approach which Beckett would have no doubt found distasteful.²² As with his

20 Throughout his early life Beckett was complementing his formal education by filling in the gaps in his knowledge and looking at subjects in a greater depth than had been afforded by his time at Trinity College, Dublin. Indeed, as one can see throughout *Damned to Fame* Beckett would become for a time almost obsessed by a new interest and devote a great deal of time in understanding its details.

21 Samuel Beckett, *Whoroscope* (1930); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, IV (New York: Grove Press, 2006), p. 6.

22 It was only in his youth that Beckett wrote with a critical eye and even then his style is purposeful but esoteric. In the early monograph *Proust* (1931) there is a serious commitment to the task, points to be made but with a grace which avoids hammering a point. In later life a collection of writings was released, which were fragments of his critical work. Although Beckett did not object to the publication of this collection, he did say they were 'mere products of friendly obligation or economic need.' Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta* (London: Calder, 1983), p. 7.

reluctance to explain the meaning of his work, one has a sense that for Beckett there is an extrovert impulse in opening one's opinions for display. As we look at each subsequent novel it will become clear that the strong positions Beckett takes are never explicitly reported by a character or narrator. Instead, we shall find these ideas below the surface, manifested by the interplay of form and content. Given the nature of Beckett's scepticism about truth propositions and their authority, these more elusive deployments of key Cartesian positions seem in character. As we shall see, these are accessible through works such as *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) and the later reflections of Geulincx. The key difference between *Whoroscope* and *Murphy* in this matter is that, more than just offering witty, revealing quips about the man and his work, we find a greater engagement with some central Cartesian notions played out through the content of the novel.

The novel opens upon Murphy who, exploring the mind-body separation in the most literal of ways, has attempted to cut himself off from the outside world. He has done this by means of seven scarves (although only six are described), which are used to bind his body to a favourite rocking chair. This allows him the level of physical restraint necessary to exist in a state exclusively within his mind. Attempts at detachment from the base physicality of the tangible world is a central concern of *Murphy* and something that appears in various forms and with varying results. Before going into specific examples it is worth turning again to the quotation from Beckett's letters. Illuminating the statement, 'Where you are worth nothing, may you also wish for nothing', we can see this is also a reference to the way detachment from the outer world can facilitate a level of peace and harmony in the mind. This is in contrast to the quotation from Malraux, which suggests that a detachment from the body and from the physicality of the world is impossible, hampered as it is by the need to find others who share a set of concerns.²³

23 This is a concern of Beckett's that we can see in his earliest work. In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*

This again is a central dialectic that will be mediated by various other concerns: from our introduction to Murphy, through his relationship with Celia, the gaggle of characters trying to track him down, his working in a mental institution, meeting Mr Eldon and his eventual death. All the events in this apparently comic novel are consequences of Murphy's constant battle to live within his mind, in spite of the forces (his internal processes and the people around him) that make this impossible. We can see that the solution may be presented in Murphy's rejection of the world in favour of his mind. This is of course a perspective that many critics have discussed, not least Rubin Rabinovitz in his book *The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction*. In the following passage he illustrates the binary nature of Murphy's beliefs and how the strength of his conviction in them leads to his bizarre admiration for the residents of the institution he comes to work at:

Murphy, a dualist in the Cartesian tradition, believes that reality has a physical component ("the big world") and a mental component ("the little world"). After arriving at the M.M.M., Murphy persuades himself that insanity is nothing more than full-time residence in the little world. If the inmates at the M.M.M. seem bizarre, it is because they are being judged by the rules of a world they have abandoned. The psychiatrists are the only ones whose behaviour is irrational: they condemn the pleasures of the little world without having sampled them.²⁴

Murphy the Comedy

Yet, before we examine this in detail it is worth looking at *Murphy's* status as comic novel.

The book does not belong to any obvious or particular tradition, although it certainly takes its generic sensibilities from a pre-modernist period.²⁵ From someone as experimental as

the most intelligible parts of the book are those that revolve around Belacqua's relationships with three women. In his interaction with these women we find a distaste for sexuality and its encroachment into attempts at a life lived in more meaningful pursuits.

²⁴ Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 85.

²⁵ In *A Taste for the Negative* Shane Weller makes an excellent case for the novel as a 'work of comically grotesque realism', one that reveals the mode to be terminally limited by its inability to express anything more than the most basic levels of reality. He writes that 'Through this disparaging of its own means, *Murphy* points dissonantly towards a literature that would be emancipated from the severe limitations of that realistic art which comes in for such harsh criticism in Beckett's critical writings of the 1930s, for being a mere transcription of the coherent surface.' Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), p. 73.

Beckett, the mode is used in a way alien to the eighteenth and nineteenth century works which are the most representative examples. Comedy has often been a vehicle for experiment; one only has to leaf through *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) to see that as far back as the eighteenth century the comic novel was breaking ground stylistically and conceptually. Even in Beckett's time, we have the works of his countryman Flynn O'Brien who, with such novels as *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), was using the mode to unravel narrative structure and harness the comic power of myth. These are books that use genre for subversion and parody, and we can place Beckett's early work comfortably in this group. *Murphy*, and indeed most of the novels use comedy to expose the ridiculous nature of both narrative and language itself, but also those issues at the heart of assumptions regarding agency, thought and existence. One only need look to scenes like Murphy's ordering of his biscuits in Hyde Park. The passage reads:

On his knees now before the five it struck him for the first time that these prepossessions reduced to a paltry six the number of ways in which he could make this meal. But this was to violate the very essence of assortment, this was red permanganate on the Rima of variety. Even if he conquered his prejudice against the anonymous, still there would be only twenty-four ways in which the biscuits could be eaten. But were he to take the final step and overcome his infatuation with the ginger, then the assortment would spring into life before him, dancing the radiant measure of its total permutability, edible in a hundred and twenty ways! (MU, pp. 59-60.)

The farcical nature of this episode became typically Beckettian as the author published more work. In particular, when reading this passage, one thinks of Molloy's sucking stones. Similarly, this involves a lengthy, logical debate in the character's mind as to the method of alternating the possibilities of consumables. The difference in the more evolved *Molloy* will relate to the protagonist, who lives even more in his mind than does Murphy. The fact that Molloy sucks a stone rather than eats food already pushes him toward greater mental and physical decay, coupled with the possibilities and deliberations being compounded, dealing as he is with the multiple pockets of his greatcoat.

This comic subversion of the novel occurs in other ways. Refusing to relinquish an episode of farce Beckett purposefully forces the joke to continue, imbuing a scene with a sense of tragicomedy intended to discomfit. Specifically, there is the episode in which Wylie, Miss Counihan and Neary finally have their tripartite confrontation and discover the treachery of which they have been guilty. As Neary realises there is no longer any point delaying the inevitable, he instructs Miss Counihan:

“The gentleman is locked out,” called Neary. “Let him in.”
 Wylie strode in much too boldly and Miss Counihan rose.
 “Good girl,” said Neary. “Now lock the door behind the gentleman.”
 Wylie and Miss Counihan met face to face, a trying experience for them both.
 “You cur,” said Miss Counihan, getting her blow in first.
 “You bitch,” said Wylie.
 They belonged to the same great group.
 “You take the tone out of my mouth,” said Neary, “if not the terms.”
 “You cur,” said Miss Counihan, making a bid for the last word.
 “Before you go any further-” said Neary. (MU, p. 125.)

Firstly, what is notable about this dialogue is the narrator’s tone which is particularly knowing, and almost cynical, in describing the speech. This stylised approach is peculiar to the early works in that it operates within genre, whilst playing with generic conventions. One is reminded of Wilde’s social comedies in this exchange, with a situation reminiscent of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1893). In *Murphy* however, we find only the shell of the genre with the characters confused as to what their parts in the scenario require. They are unsure and faltering in their dialogue, which serves to dislocate the mode from the kind of satiric specificity we would find in Wilde. It is not Victorian society, but intelligibility over the world itself, which is critiqued and revealed as hollow. This is the target of the joke in both of these examples. In the ordering of the biscuits we have an early example of the kind of exhaustive logical process applied to something inconsequential we shall see much more of in *Watt*. By displacing a rational methodology in this way it becomes ludicrous and illustrates how impossible such a method would be in trying to comprehend the vastness of

the world, let alone Murphy's lunch. The three-way interaction of Miss Counihan, Neary and Wylie is perhaps less focussed. Essentially it presents a comedic situation, but fails to fulfil its promise. Rather than wit, it is confusion which reigns here, with no character really sure of what they are supposed to be doing. In Beckett's later work the narration remains similarly self-conscious, but instead of operating within established modes it forges its own strange, disorienting tone. In this incident the uncertainty of the characters as to how they should approach one another is mirrored in the reader's uncertainty in approaching this textual moment. The structure of the incident has become transformed by the dialogue and occupies a strange middle ground, in which preconceptions shift into ambiguity and the reader is left with a bad taste over the inadequacies of communication. This is both in terms of how the characters interact, but also in how the comedy of the scene is portrayed. One may feel as if they are missing something, as it were, but this is another part of how the novel uses comedy to attack intelligibility itself.

The ends at which these examples aim are similar. To see any of Beckett's works as a thorough critique of a specific philosophical system is an exaggeration, yet many of the works address concepts or traditions which are significant in the history of ideas. In the scene with the biscuits and indeed throughout the novel Beckett makes rationalism a target. In a parodic mode of pastiche, the idea of engaging the world in a logically sound way is lampooned by association with something as trivial as biscuits. Beckett's purpose lies at the bedrock of his engagement with the philosophical canon. As will become evident, he is deeply sceptical of virtually all metaphysical traditions, and sees any attempt to conceptualise the world in prescriptive or fixed terms as inadequate. *Murphy's* independence of thought does not possess the force of Beckett's later novels, rendered through the form and content of the work itself. However, there is in this and other

incidents, such as the chess game between Murphy and Endon, a distinct attempt to disrupt and undermine not just novelistic convention, but also the philosophical principles underpinning much accepted thought.

In the case of the novel it is in subversion of readerly expectation that Beckett is most effective. *Murphy* draws the reader in with an engaging plot and accessible generic framework that does not at first appear to harness abstract ideas at a glance. As already mentioned, this is a mere shell Beckett uses for his own ends. Moments of farce such as the biscuits or the chess game are taken to such lengths that we step out of the generic frame and are induced to question the purpose of such incidents. In the case of the chess game, where there is a subversion of the conventions and rules of prose writing at a point approaching the story's very climax, we encounter an extended parodic episode.

Functioning without a punchline, such as the dog eating the biscuits in the other example we looked at, the game of chess is illustrative of, above all, the lack of meaning we can divine from action, cause and effect. In this scene Beckett describes the way Endon's mental detachment means he plays a game that will always end with the pieces back where they began. But he does more; and details every move in turn, an exercise superfluous to the story's progress. This convention of chess literature is imported into the novel form, and one cannot escape how uncomfortably it sits. Once again, this places the conventions of the form in suspension, replacing these with a seemingly arbitrary descent into parody. Yet, it is not with this aim alone that Beckett includes the moves of the game.

As much as it is a critique of generic narrative formula and prescriptive rationalism, it is also an integral part of Beckett's own response; the philosophical position he asserts in

Murphy. Far from representing any sort of affirmative metaphysics, Beckett's project in this early work seems a concerted effort at disavowal of any such system. We may recall the quotation with which we began, regarding negation and reduction as Beckett's own path. Often this is done by means of illustration, as in the example we are discussing, or the astrological predictions by which Murphy lives his life. Beckett admires games like chess, which possess the possibilities of cyclical and deductive thinking in the way the two sides face each other down. Murphy enjoys playing against Endon, because in its fixity and completeness, it is the kind of structure the former cannot find in the material world. Endon has no wish to win, and in this he fits perfectly into Murphy's conception of the ideal existence, one that leaves behind crude desire, replacing it with a higher goal, devoted to the "little world" of mental abstractions.

In Shane Weller's *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* he interrogates the idealism Murphy has with regards Mr Endon, offering firstly a position which casts the latter as the paradigmatic example the former believes he must follow in order to escape the slavery to the material universe he feels:

Mr Endon is taken by Murphy, then, to be the master of negation, for whom the 'outer reality' is quite simply nothing, its absence of value having been not only recognised (as it is by Murphy himself) but transcended; in other words he is taken to be the antithesis of Celia.²⁶

Celia is of course the antithesis because of her status as prostitute, which is to say someone who makes a living from her body, but also because of Murphy's emotional attachment to her, which drags him back to the surface world of everyday realities. Weller questions the uniformity of these ideas though by suggesting that 'While Celia becomes more like Murphy, practicing an art of negation, Mr Endon is revealed as something other than the pure 'autology' that Murphy has taken him to be.'²⁷ Celia is revealed to be more than the

²⁶ Weller, p. 84.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

societal status her job proffers and Mr Endon's apparent disinterest is revealed to be somewhat of an impossibility as Weller goes on to explain,

The experience of absolute value is, it seems, the experience of being without value. Even if Murphy is no more than a 'chessy eye' to Mr Endon (M242), this need for an eye, this need to be seen not seeing, makes of Mr Endon something other than the antithesis of being without value, something other than the overcoming of the nihilism which is experienced as imprisonment within the valuelessness of the 'outer reality'.²⁸

In other words, if Endon is more than just a series of robotic responses, if he has achieved the purest state of detachment from the world Murphy so longs for, then his desire to participate in the game, 'to be seen not seeing' as Weller puts it, sweeps him back into the maelstrom of worldly interactions with all the wants, needs and requirements this entails. Mr Endon has not achieved the pure being without value that Weller discusses as Murphy's ideal, the 'absolute value' that lies in that state. Much like the 'comically grotesque realism'²⁹ Weller sees as essential to the generic structure of *Murphy* there is a terminally unfulfilled aspect in the way Murphy strives to achieve his separation from the world of the body and the novel is more about this impasse than any sort of solution to the philosophical problems *Murphy* presents.

Astrology as Replacement Metaphysics

Similarly there is the horoscope Murphy must have cast before he can begin the search for employment Celia is desperate he undertakes. Many have speculated as to its purpose in the novel. It seems an arbitrary part of Murphy's character, and a relatively weak plot device. In *Damned to Fame* James Knowlson speaks broadly of preordained events, and about the force of its presence as meaning 'it gradually acquires the authority of fatality'.³⁰ Like most explanations of the place astrology has in the novel this is non-specific. In another of Beckett's letters to McGreevy he speaks of Jung insisting 'on patients having

²⁸ Ibid., p. 89.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 73.

³⁰ *Damned to Fame*, p. 208.

their horoscopes cast!"³¹ Beckett is astounded by the decision of an advanced thinker like Jung to use a spurious, pseudo-scientific system as part of his psychoanalytic method. We know at the time Beckett wrote the novel he was still regularly seeing a psychoanalyst named Bion, and that he had taken a keen interest in Jung and psychoanalysis in general. This letter was written after Beckett had been to see Jung deliver a series of lectures. It seems likely that was the genesis of Murphy's interest in astrology.³²

One of the most interesting things revealed by the inclusion of astrology in *Murphy*, is a noteworthy characteristic of Beckett's writing. Everything we know about his beliefs, life and indeed his astonishment at Jung's use of the horoscope leads us to conclude that, as a system, as a way of understanding the world, it held no credibility for him. This said, it is an essential part of Murphy's journey, and the catalyst which guides his decision making process and thus the novel's progress. For this reason, one could be forgiven for thinking Beckett has some affinity with the practice. As with so many of his interests, however, he includes it in the novel to aid the story's progress and to illustrate his ambivalence about definitive metaphysics. Its inclusion may entail a far greater significance than I am here suggesting, but most likely it forms another part of the bricolage, adding to an overall impression we can only understand by stepping back and taking in its cumulative meaning.

It is of course the question of allegiance to a particular school or thinker which many have tried to address. The wealth of philosophical content within the works has led scholars such as John Calder to proclaim them vehicles for Beckett's philosophy.³³ One must be wary of this. The content does not necessarily represent the beliefs of the author, at least not literally. Astrology is Murphy's choice because for Beckett it is, amongst the myriad of

³¹ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, p. 282.

³² *Damned to Fame*, p. 218

³³ John Calder, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder Publications, 2001), p. 1.

flawed ways to interpret the world, as good a solution as any. Systems, philosophical, theological or otherwise, all share bedrock flaws in the totalising understanding they try to forge and the tools of language they employ. Beckett's scepticism would never allow him to overcome his prejudices and subscribe to any of these, and this is really the central position of *Murphy*; not a substitute metaphysics, but a critical response to the limitations of philosophical, theological and indeed astrological systems. Murphy's surety in his belief that a meaningful existence is to live as much as possible within the confines of one's mind is, as Shane Weller suggests, equally suspect and most likely impossible. In highlighting the futility of these approaches *Murphy* is a questioning, a questioning of where one can look for meaning if not through a prescribed or personal systematic understanding of the world.

This chapter seeks to understand *Murphy* as a work of bricolage, and more specifically bricolage as Derrida conceives it. However, before going too far with this type of thinking, it should be made clear that *Murphy*, only the second novel Beckett wrote, is not poststructuralist or deconstructionist in any developed way. Firstly, we are dealing with fiction, not a treatise, and secondly it is as the novels progress that we shall witness the birth of Beckett's symbiosis of form and content, the mode in which his ideas are best illustrated. More accurately, in this instance we have a novel that often seems prescient about certain poststructuralist ideas, specifically the method of gleaning more truthful avenues for finding meaning than those that have been suggested by the history of metaphysics. But it could hardly be said to participate in a movement not yet founded. Such hyperbole is unnecessary for work with its own complex philosophical position.

We have seen that Beckett is indeed fascinated with the history of philosophy, almost as much as he is interested in the philosophical concepts. One suspects Geulincx is interesting to Beckett not just because of his approach to Descartes, but also because of his historical relegation. Reading him was at the time something that could only be done in the original Latin. For Beckett, this meant trips to the library of Trinity College, one of the only places then to hold copies. His central work *Metaphysics* (1691), recently (1999) translated into English by Martin Wilson, is a perfect example of a text Beckett was intensely interested in despite his disagreement with large parts of it. One of Geulincx's central principles was that because God had predetermined existence, action was in essence ineffectual and meaningless. Some have thought Beckett must have felt an affinity with this type of thinking, and not religious himself, believed in a secular version of this position. The truth, which can be seen throughout Beckett's response to his various influences, was that he was attracted to a specific part of Geulincx's philosophy, not the whole. What drew him was the second part of the maxim: the idea that action and thought are a fruitless endeavor. Deprived of the religious context essential to Geulincx's deeply faith-based philosophy the idea of meaninglessness, but an untethered meaninglessness begins with Geulincx but becomes something entirely at conflict with the philosopher's position. If Beckett's oeuvre can be summarized it must surely be around this lack of agency. Yet, in the preface to Wilson's translation of *Metaphysics* he says:

But, with due reverence to Beckett, it seems to me that he misrepresents Geulincx in four distinct areas. First, such a response [Beckett's 'quietism, passivity, and the abnegation of will'] takes into account only one part of the human condition. I may cease to will anything concerning my body, but God will not thereby cease to affect me through it as an instrument only these affections will not now have any direct relation to my will, except of a purely negative kind. For instance, if I cease to will my body to feed itself, I shall not escape the distress consequent upon starvation and thirst. This leads on to the second point that the cessation of will is itself a discretion of my will, leaving my body to behave variously according to the laws of motion, or to what God deceives for it in the absence of my will. Third, Geulincx does not condemn the human condition as *per se* miserable, and something from which it is reasonable to seek escape. Lastly, it is God, not man, who has dominion over death; so that attempting to quit the

human condition by means of mortification of the will is the would-be exercise of a power that one does not possess.³⁴

Wilson is simplistic in his assessment of Beckett's concerns and outlook, but he is broadly accurate. He details the author's obsession with one part of the human condition, his courting of inaction and negation of will, and of course his rendering of life as an essentially "miserable" affair. What he fails to recognize, is that although Beckett does make many references to Geulincx he does not attempt to engage with his philosophy, as much as fillet an aspect of his thought and transpose it entirely in its new context. Beckett's interest in Geulincx stems from the areas in which their disparate thought seems to momentarily meet. Beckett takes the idea that man is a creature who will eternally fail to recognize his own futility in the world, and the aporia parallel to this. For Geulincx, one should not abandon one's reason because of the existence of God, whereas for Beckett, acceptance of the unknowability we inhabit does not mean inaction is the appropriate form of living. Here Wilson seems to misunderstand Beckett, almost suggesting the writer is some sort of advocate of suicide. When Beckett says he sees *Murphy* as partly a product of Geulincx's 'where you are worth nothing, may you also wish for nothing', clearly it is Beckett's reworking of this maxim we should focus upon, and not suppose an engagement with this kind of post-Cartesian philosophy in representative terms. In this quotation Beckett affirms his status as bricoleur. As Edith Kern puts it in *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique* (1970) '[Geulincx] is also the source of the philosophical argument according to which Murphy lives and dies.'³⁵ It is not a version of his argument Geulincx would recognise or endorse and Beckett is interested in it only in so far as it can be augmented to fit his own purposes.

34 Arnold Geulincx, *Metaphysics*, trans. by Martin Wilson (Cambridgeshire: Christoffel Press, 1999), p. 12-13.

35 Edith Kern, *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 167

Murphy is then an illustration of the key principle in *Metaphysics*, namely that attempting to garner meaning from action is redundant. For Geulincx, the reason for this is that God has pre-determined existence; but for Beckett, the reason has far more to do with a deeper, general scepticism about meaning and our understanding of being. The story of *Murphy* is therefore in part a rendering of this idea. The notion of human life being worthless, as Geulincx puts it, is not necessarily negative, but can be seen as the true awareness in which to live. Beckett's affinity with Geulincx is based on this principle. Yet, as abstract as Beckett can appear, *Murphy* is in many ways as radical a treatment as any other of his about the problems that arise when ideas encounter the practicalities of living. For a later rationalist like Emmanuel Kant there is a harmony to be found in a balance of empirical and rationalist approaches, but Beckett could never accept this type of resolution. The process of turning experience into abstraction through reason is implicitly rejected by *Murphy*, suggesting that action is unknowable, and the tools of reason flimsy and imperfect. From the very outset *Murphy* not only shares the narrator's awareness of the issues of existence and agency we have been discussing, but does not ignore these, and attempts to live a life based upon his metaphysical awakenings. In the opening paragraph of the first chapter he is described as existing in a West Brompton mew 'as though he were free.' (MU, p. 3.) This is a reference not merely to the superficial financial and social woes we will see *Murphy* deal with, but also to how these tie in with the greater consciousness that informs his character and guides his actions. The 'as though he were free' is a joke at *Murphy*'s expense. The surety he feels over his inner and outer world dichotomy will gradually be revealed to be misplaced and the cruelty of having him die whilst trying to achieve inner harmony, dispatched by the physical desire to be warm in his room is the paradigmatic example of this.

The mind-body problem is of course key to any sort of text drawing so openly upon Descartes, who wrote on this several times, most famously in the sixth of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where he addresses the problem of moving from the cogito into the physical world, an area in which Beckett finds it difficult to agree with him. At least in Descartes' initial meditations Beckett can find congruence with the process of doubting, as we see in the extreme scepticism behind Murphy's behaviour. But a central concern is also that of this difference between the little world of the mind and the external world, outside the mind. Beckett does not unequivocally say God does not exist, but his texts and indeed his life provide evidence he was a sceptic. Wherever God becomes the reason behind a philosophical maxim, this is a step the author cannot take. Again, this is bricolage; Beckett takes what he can use and discards the rest. Beckett can identify with the problem itself. The solution is too much of a leap of faith for him.

Echoes of Schopenhauer

The case is similar with Schopenhauer, renowned for his followers who often focus on the peripheries of his work, whilst disagreeing with his central philosophical system. Schopenhauer is not cited by Beckett, but he nonetheless is relevant to our understanding of *Murphy*. If the quotation Beckett chose from Geulincx was central to understanding Beckett's text, we can see a further convergence of thought in Schopenhauer's statement:

nothing else can be stated as the aim of our existence except the knowledge that it would be better for us not to exist.³⁶

This is typical of Beckett's darker side, a view of life explored in depth in works like *The Unnamable* (1953). Its desperation accompanies the searching scepticism we have seen thus far, and Beckett oscillates between the two attitudes. This emerges often in the form of unravelling what is held to be fixed, which is sufficiently revealing to undermine the

³⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will and Representation*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne, II (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 605.

pessimism embodied in the above quotation. It is also worth noting that it is again the roots of works like *The World as Will and Representation* (1818-19) that seem to have the greatest congruence of ideas with *Murphy*. Schopenhauer's central text outlines his theory of the intellect and the will. This distinction is predicated upon the fact the world can be divided into appearance (the intellect) and the thing in itself (the will). At first, this seems to resemble the distinction in *Murphy* between the big world of the exterior and physical and the interiority of the mind. But it is in the proposed complexities of the will that Schopenhauer often loses followers and any similarities to Beckett's novel become cloudier. This force Schopenhauer often casts in different lights, and the dualism it creates is difficult to sustain as part of a metaphysical system. What is clear however, is that it is the true power that controls our actions and we should at all times do as much as possible to avoid its domineering influence. This is of course an impossibility, being as it is inescapable, and leads Schopenhauer to make statements as previously quoted. However, the impossibility of such a task is that which those who are interested in the thinker most often focus upon, finding in the addendums and "lesser" works the most engaging aspects of Schopenhauer's thought.

In the third book of *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer moves away from description of the intellect and the will and into areas where he focuses upon the aesthetic as a tool. The will, he has stated, is largely inescapable.

When, however, an external cause or inward disposition suddenly raises us out of the endless stream of willing, and snatches knowledge from the thralldom of the will, the attention is now no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will. Thus it considers things without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively[...] Then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord, and all is well with us³⁷

This 'external cause' is the aesthetic object which Schopenhauer will contend is among the

³⁷ Schopenhauer, p. 196.

only things that can possibly pull us from full engagement with the will. But the aesthetic object cannot be contemplated in just any manner. It must be approached from a detached and objective perspective, from a point of observation verging on the meditative and seeking the disrobing of selfhood. One does not need to look far to find the link to *Murphy*. This novel begins with its protagonist strapped to an armchair, seeking not abandonment, but engagement with the aspects of himself hardest to apprehend. In this earliest example we see not aesthetic contemplation as a means of escaping the will, but rather, contemplation of the state of simply being within one's own consciousness. Indeed, Murphy is not an aesthete at all, and does not appear to share any of his creator's interests in literature, art or music. The most sustained aesthetic experience he has comes from the chess games he shares with Mr Endon, that we have already discussed. In these, Murphy finds detached appreciation; a sense of something greater than the world around him. In the way he lists the moves he almost worships their aesthetic content. However, can we see in this an escape from the entanglements of the world for Murphy? Do his attempts to withdraw from the physical world and his aesthetic appreciation of the chess game and Mr Endon himself allow a release from the suffocating nature of living? Based on what we have already said regarding how impossible Murphy's "little world" dream is I think we must conclude no. As Schopenhauer suggests the fragmentary moments of peace outwith the 'endless stream of willing' are fleeting, 'always sought but always escaping' and *Murphy* seems to say as much. He may achieve a small measure of something beyond the incumbent restrictions of living in the world, but as his death illustrates, Murphy and indeed everyone is forced at a certain point to reconcile the aspects of living they cannot understand. In following chapters on the post World War II works we shall see how Beckett's intensified focus on the physical degradations of the body serve to magnify the inescapability of this awareness.

The Significance of Section Six

This dualism of the outer and inner worlds, of the physical or tangible and that which exists only in the mind may seem a facile comparison. It could be argued that to separate the two is a fallacy, their nature being interrelated and each relying on the other for its existence, in a process of symbioses. Throughout the book, whenever reference is made to this internal state of Murphy's mind it is usually done with an addendum, which references 'section six', a part of the book still to come, and which promises to enlighten the reader on the precise nature of what is discussed. Examples litter the novel's early stages. The first is on the second page, where the narrator describes how and why Murphy has strapped himself to his chair:

He sat in his chair in this way because it gave him pleasure! First it gave his body pleasure, it appeased his body. Then it set him free in his mind. For it was not until his body was appeased that he could come alive in his mind, as described in section six. And life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word.
(MU, p. 4.)

The faults in this binary understanding of existence would be obvious to Beckett, given his understanding of metaphysics. One should not confuse character or narrator with the author on this point. Only a couple of pages later he returns to the purpose of physical restraint, stating it is the place 'where he could love himself.' (MU, p. 6.) Mention is repeatedly made to section six, before it appears around a third of the way into the book. Before looking at this section, it is worth noting the tendency in any work on *Murphy* to have the crux of the argument turn on this point. It therefore seems necessary to say before we turn to the description of Murphy's mind that this part of the novel is not going to be viewed as the coda to the whole; Beckett avoids such explanatory episodes in his work. Indeed, as the novels evolve with each publication we shall see more and more a commitment to a mode which is sprawling in significant content, a resistance to micro-analysis best

understood as a tapestry of meaning. In the turn to French this will become more obvious as Beckett finally finds his voice; and we will see in *Molloy* a focus on the vagrant's specifically continuous inner monologue as part of the effort at creating something best understood as a whole. By the time we reach *The Unnamable* the technique has been further refined, no longer depending on character, but using the narration itself in a cyclically abstracted manner. This is something to return to, but for the purposes of section six it is worth saying that not only is Beckett a writer who firstly would not wholeheartedly subscribe to the aforementioned dualism of the inner and outer world that is detailed in *Murphy*, but that furthermore we are dealing here with a comic novel. We are free to find meaning in section six, but must see it as part of a larger whole, invested with the same spirit of play as the chess game and the horoscope. The section itself is only a few pages long and begins with this proviso:

It is most unfortunate, but the point of this story has been reached where a justification of the expression "Murphy's mind" has to be attempted. Happily we need not concern ourselves with this apparatus as it really was – that would be an extravagance and an impertinence – but solely with what it felt and pictured itself to be. (MU, p. 67.)

Beckett immediately states that Murphy's mind is not going to be described, and cannot be described, but merely its self-image, a very different proposition. By making this clear we can see that, as I have said, section six is not the all-encompassing, revelatory key to *Murphy* that one may assume. We must see it working as part of the novel, and in the description that follows one can see how this is necessary. The narrator begins by saying Murphy's mind imagined itself a closed-off sphere, which assimilated physical and mental as phenomena in the same way, but with differing characteristics. This is to say that the physical differs from the purely mental or abstract, but that they are both made sense of, and in a sense exist, entirely at the disposal of the mind. It may now be clear that section six is not merely an attempt to explain Murphy's mind as it saw itself, but also a dialogue on the mind-body problem.

Murphy does not present a solution, however. He concedes 'he felt his mind to be bodytight and did not understand through what channel the intercourse was effected nor how the two experiences came to overlap.' (MU, p. 68.) He then speculates as to his knowledge of the outside world being affected by an innate understanding reminiscent of Plato's forms. In the end he concludes that their working together must be by 'some such process of supernatural determination.' (MU, p. 68.) One gathers this was not Beckett's view, sceptical and ever-questioning as he was. For Murphy the problem is not of huge significance anyway, in comparison with his instinct that 'his mind was a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own, self-sufficient and impermeable to the vicissitudes of the body.' (MU, p. 68.) He admits that any mind-body solution that did not run counter to this was sufficient for him. Which raises the question if there would ever be a situation in which Beckett himself could accept the facile resolution Murphy entertains in this paragraph. I think we must conclude no. By his own admission, Murphy succumbs to the premise that living within his mind is the true form of life, and that he will strive for this at every juncture. In *Murphy* Beckett writes that 'all the puppets in this book whinge sooner or later, except Murphy, who is not a puppet' (MU, p. 76.), which could be seen as an admission Murphy is autobiographical. No doubt there are similarities between Murphy and Beckett; but one can see at this point an arrested development in Murphy's metaphysical reflections that Beckett had already moved beyond. We could see Murphy, as a younger version of Beckett; someone more likely to accept binary propositions, or to wilfully ignore irresolvable mind-body problems.

Concluding the section, Beckett speaks more specifically of the nature of Murphy's mind as he saw it. He describes it as having a tripartite structure composed of the light, half

light, and the dark. The degree of abstraction and removal from the world runs parallel to the extinguishing of light. This formulation of the mind into three zones is part of the narrator's "reluctant" need to describe the interior of Murphy's mind. One may assume this reticence is based on the artificiality of the section's placing in the novel, although for Beckett such self-consciousness is usually something embraced not avoided. Perhaps his reticence relates to the flaws Beckett would have found in this thinking, and the purposeful injection of outdated notions into his prose. In the last stage, that of darkness, Murphy's mind is described as in complete isolation, interacting with a 'flux of forms' (MU, p. 70.), and losing even his own selfhood as he becomes part of a greater whole. As Aude Pichon puts it:

Murphy's striving to reach the third region of his mind, the region in a perpetual state of flux, is an attempt to move beyond thought, to experience the irrational and to do so by departing from a system of relation.³⁸

He aims to spend as much time as possible here: 'more and more in the dark, in the willlessness, a mote in its absolute freedom.' (MU, p. 70.) The paragraph finishes with the narrator concluding: 'This painful duty having now been discharged, no further bulletins will be issued.' (MU, p. 70.) The pain is of recreating a past awareness one believed total. Murphy believes he has all the knowledge he requires, and is convinced that regardless of the intricacies of mind-body problems his sureness of his authoritative little world existence renders all else unimportant. However, as already said, this is too convenient and easy a resolution. As Edith Kern suggests, Beckett

proffers no answers, but his manner of asking places him in the camp of the dualists with their division of body and mind, reality and unreality.³⁹

I disagree with this. At least by the time Beckett comes to write *Murphy*, the philosophical positions of the author and Murphy are at different stages of development. Section six can

³⁸ Aude Pichon, 'A Deleuzian Interpretation of Beckett's Linguistic Experiments' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Dundee, 2002), p. 53.

³⁹ Kern, p. 171.

be thought of as the solution to the philosophical problems the novel addresses. But if so, it is by way of illustration; of showing a false end point and an opposing open-ended, terminally sceptical position visible in the later works. In *The Unnamable* (1953) the protagonist says of *Murphy* that it was clumsily done and that 'you could see the ventriloquist.' (TU, p. 398.) This can inform our opinion of Beckett's relation to Murphy's views. It could be tempting to say that Beckett concedes Murphy was an obvious version of the author and that this was a flaw in the work. Certainly some credence can be given to this idea based on the aforementioned description of *Murphy's* characters as puppets. However, one could also argue that this idea of the ventriloquist has a much wider meaning and relates to the way the novel addresses its central issues. If we are to compare an early work like *Murphy* to something from the middle period such as *Molloy* we can see that direct representation of philosophical issues will be avoided almost entirely. Referencing specific metaphysical problems is replaced by a method that seeks a new illustrative mode to approach these from a further abstracted, but greater realised position. I would argue therefore that this ventriloquist comment is not an admission that Murphy and Beckett share the same persona, but that the work and the way it related to the central philosophical issues was too straightforward, too obvious and didactic for an artist that would seek to tackle his central concerns from the margins as his work evolved. This is not to dismiss the obvious similarities between Beckett and his character. He freely admitted he was displeased that despite his efforts there was still too much of him in Murphy. However, to use this as a reason for seeing the thoughts and actions of the two as interchangeable strikes me as irresponsible considering the rest of the content of the book evinces entirely different conclusions.

A Balanced Position

As I began this chapter by saying, *Murphy* is a transitional piece of work and it is with this in mind that we can best draw conclusions on what the novel reveals about its philosophical import. At the beginning of this chapter I remarked one must be careful not to cast an evolving oeuvre such as Beckett's as moving in a predetermined way towards an inevitable conclusion. There is no doubt that the inclusion of Descartes and Geulincx within *Murphy* is a way for Beckett to contextualise and then respond to the methods of rationalism, but also wider to any approach that seeks to impose an all-encompassing explanatory structure on the world. Beckett not only has affection for these thinkers, but is critical of any certainty that a rational approach to even the smallest problems could overcome the inherent unintelligibility the world offers. We can see this illustrated through the comedic aspects of the book, such as Murphy's biscuits, which ask the reader to question the respect we pay to these systems of understanding. Beginning the project this thesis aims to trace, Beckett sets out his concerns, asking through *Murphy* what kind of approach to finding meaning and living in the world is even possible.

I have attempted to show that through a thinker like Schopenhauer we can see Beckett's awareness that seeking to grasp apparently truthful methods of surmounting the unknowability of the world often ignores the realities of existing in it. The inclusion of astrology as part of the bricolage of sources *Murphy* gathers together implicitly places it alongside the supposedly more credible ways to interpret the world that the rationalist aspects suggest. However, as we have seen through Murphy's unfaltering belief in the truth of his inner and outer worlds, the cohesion of these methods lies in their assumed totality of understanding and this is what the novel seeks to question. In later chapters we shall see Beckett move towards offering an answer but in an early work like *Murphy* he, most likely unknowingly, began a sceptical, questioning project that sought to displace the

assumed authority of how we find meaning in the world. In the next chapter on *Watt* we shall see how this process continues.

Chapter Two:

Watt and the Limits of Language

The circumstances under which Samuel Beckett wrote his third novel *Watt* invite us, perhaps more than any of his other works, to examine the meeting place of life and art. Unpublished until long after its completion, this is a novel written, in the majority, during the cataclysmic events of World War II. In addition, it was not written in some far-off safe haven from which the author could survey the events unfolding and use this detached vantage point to comment on what he saw. Beckett wrote *Watt* whilst in hiding, working with the French resistance in the south of his adopted nation, later characteristically downplaying work for which he received the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille de la Résistance.⁴⁰

The actual circumstances under which the novel was written have been documented by James Knowlson in *Damned to Fame*, but like much information on Beckett from this period the level of detail is minimal. We do know that by virtue of his ability to write the book there must have been extended periods of time when life took on a façade of normality and work could again commence. This said, *Watt* is a novel of war and the question forces itself upon us: how far can we detect the events of the conflict, either as they personally affected the author, or indeed globally, finding their way into the fabric of the story?

Of course it must be as part of *Watt's* subtext that we look for the war because the events of the book itself do not reflect what was happening in Europe and further afield. In fact the plot of *Watt* is, in its simplicity and detachment from contemporary events, as removed

⁴⁰ Beckett referred to his part in sabotaging German occupation of France as 'mere boyscout stuff.' James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 303.

from what one may imagine a “war novel” to be as possible. Looking to the previous chapter, *Watt* begins by picking up where *Murphy* left off. The body of the novel is framed by two chapters which operate within the same type of satirical comedy of manners of the previous work. Opening upon Mr Hackett, and not Watt, we join the older man as he approaches a favourite bench only to find a young couple canoodling on it. After unsuccessfully trying to get a policeman to arrest them he is met by an older couple named Goff and Tetty Nixon. As Hackett is introduced to Tetty, Watt departs a train from the other platform, literally falling into their world from his carriage. It is at this point that Mr Nixon recognises the mystery figure and goes to speak to him about a past debt owed. After a moment he returns and is infuriated by the conversation he has had with Watt, a situation with which the reader will soon come to empathise. Being unable to pay back the full amount, Watt offers instead everything he has, and it is this disregard for self-preservation that seems to anger his acquaintance. When Goff is pressed further by Tetty and Hackett as to the nature of his relationship with Watt the novel begins to move into the territory it will occupy in the majority. Despite the fact Mr Nixon has known Watt for some time he cannot recall the way they met or how they know each other. Furthermore, he cannot recall any specific details about Watt and again pressed he simply replies ‘He does not invite mention... there are people like that.’ (WA, p. 181.)

This inability to describe Watt in even the most basic physical terms, despite having seen him only moments ago, is the first indication of the direction the novel will pursue. Watt is unknowable and *Watt* is a novel about unknowability. In this chapter I am going to argue that Watt represents not so much strides toward a new innovative method in dealing with Beckett’s philosophical preoccupations, but rather a primary concern with the moment of awareness that leads to finding new avenues of exploration. In this way we can see

Beckett's third novel as laying the groundwork for the more overtly homogeneous form/content experiments we find in the novellas and furthermore *The Trilogy*. The epiphany is metaphysical and epistemological; *Watt* is about the effects on a person once they become aware they have been failed by language, structure, logic and any other system that would seek to enclose and explain the totality of existence. I intend to show how Beckett achieves this within the fiction of *Watt*. In everything from the metafictionality of the novel, the physicality of the characters, to the purposefully antifictional elements, there is a working toward the same awareness. These elements collectively build a picture of a writer dealing with failures in understanding the world and about to embark upon work that will try and surmount this obstacle.

From *Murphy* to Mauthner - The Failure of Language

Watt is a reincarnation of *Murphy* in much the same way all Beckett's characters are in fact the same archetype, honed and made new with each passing work. Even death cannot prevent *Murphy* reappearing, although the suggestion is always a type of rebirth rather than metamorphosis. Often when a figure appears again he will be the same, but like Stephen Connor's circle⁴¹, made different by the process of repetition; the narrator nods significantly toward the two characters' relationship, saying of *Watt*: 'he had once known [the stars] familiarly by name when dying in London.' (WA, p. 40.) Of course this is a reference to *Murphy*'s death, with London and astrology being key aspects of the earlier work. Since his rebirth he has taken on more aspects of the archetype we shall come to know as the novels progress. Older than *Murphy*, with the hat and greatcoat that will become the

41 In *Repetition, Theory and Text* Connor examines Beckett from a poststructuralist vantage, invoking the idea of *différance*: 'Thus our continually renewed belief in the singleness of a text like *Watt*, our belief that it has a centre, is questioned by the various kinds of repetition which are essential to it. *Watt* seems neither to be original, the centre of its own circle, or secondary, the reproduction of some other, earlier text (Sam's, or *Watt*'s, 'actual words'), the circle produced from some other centre. What is original, as Derrida has argued, seems to be the fact of repetition itself, and the sense of lack which comes from it.' Stephen Connor, *Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 39.

hallmark of Beckett's tramp-like figure, it is noted that Watt is actually a creature with good hygiene. This is something that will be phased out in the postwar works, where the physical infirmities of Beckett's character extend into the failed maintenance of bodily self-respect. In personality the two figures share many similarities, including an aversion to the social spheres of the world. However, the sense we get of Watt being so detached from society he is like a stranger looking in dwarfs the duality of Murphy's longing for separation/seeking the company of others. The second maxim of Beckett's in understanding *Murphy* was Malraux's '*Il est difficile à celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les siens* (negation). [It is hard for someone who lives outside society not to seek out his own].¹⁴² Watt is truly a figure alone and the few interactions he does have with Sam, Arsene and Mr Nixon serve only to further our opinion that he has found himself, through his pilgrimage, separated from the world of men. Later, we shall look closer at the most serious manifestation of this in the loss of language Watt suffers, forcing the narrator to translate his syntactical reversals back into something intelligible.

Of course what unites the two protagonists, and indeed all of Beckett's characters is their embodiment of the search for answers to the questions of existence. Both Murphy and Watt are on a quest to find meaning in the world, and yet a key difference between the two are the levels of awareness they have over systems of understanding already available. Murphy lives a recognisable life, embroiled as he is in a web of relationships, despite often trying not to be. Watt on the other hand spends the entire novel on an ultimately unfulfilled existential pilgrimage, the last bastion of hope that he can find any salvation in a structure, system or being that can order his world. The reasons or knowledge that have led him toward the house of Mr. Knott are, like so much in the novel, obscured from the reader.

⁴² *Damned to Fame*, p. 219. The translations and other additions within brackets in this quotation are from Knowlson himself.

We instead get a sense that he is simply drawn there. Drawn on the promise of resolution, of answers provided not necessarily by Mr. Knott, but by being in his house, working in the role Watt has assumed. In the end of course the conclusion he reaches is the same he had already come to before starting his journey. As John Fletcher notes,

Watt indeed reaches the plenitude of his exile from the world of men only after his stay with Mr. Knott, which destroys for him the world of objects, of logic, and of names, and which takes him a step further in the dolorous calvary that is the way of the Beckettian hero from Belacqua's Dublin to the muddy netherworld of Pim.⁴³

Perhaps it was simply the final nail in the coffin needed to engineer his new life in the sanatorium. He tells Sam in the variation of speech in which he reverses the order of sentences,

Of Nought. To the source. To the teacher. To the temple. To him I brought. This emptied heart. These emptied hands. This mind ignoring. This body homeless. To love him my little reviled. My little rejected to have him. My little to learn him forgot. Abandoned my little to find him. (WA, p. 303)

Put in the correct order the paragraph reads like this:

Abandoned my little to find him. My little to learn him forgot. My little rejected to have him. To love him my little reviled. This body homeless. This mind ignoring. These emptied hands. This emptied heart. To him I brought. To the temple. To the teacher. To the source. Of Nought.

This is probably the most candid admission within the novel of Watt's purpose in seeking out Mr. Knott's household. Fletcher notes that 'Watt's syntax breaks down under the strain when he tries to tell Sam of his master, who appears as a negative god, the great Nothing of which nothing can be predicted.'⁴⁴ We understand that it is, in effect, his last chance. The last chance for order, for answers that will resolve the doubts he has about language, structure, society and existence. Of course in the end he leaves and in his only show of emotion weeps. The reason for this is not given but it seems clear enough the cause is the failure of Mr. Knott to bring him back from the edge. Daniel Katz argues that

The singularity of *Watt* in Beckett's oeuvre lies precisely in its interrogation of group or

⁴³ John Fletcher, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 79.

⁴⁴ Fletcher, p. 86.

communal structures, and the mechanisms by which the sense of belonging or estrangement is built.⁴⁵

I think we can see this in the response to leaving the house of Mr. Knott, in how this distance, even from a master like Mr. Knott who seems to manifest many of the same concerns as Watt and the succession of caretakers within which he is part of a strange social recycling, that he remains more alone than ever. These “communal structures” that Katz describes are evident everywhere, in the estrangement Watt feels from larger society as seen in the framing chapters, but most acutely in the smaller world of Mr. Knott's house. As important an aspect as this is to the novel one could be forgiven for thinking that Beckett was describing as essential in understanding *Watt* and not *Murphy* Malraux's '*Il est difficile à celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les siens* (negation). [It is hard for someone who lives outside society not to seek out his own].⁴⁶ As Katz suggests, *Watt* is the keenest of Beckett's novels regarding the estrangement of the individual from different social structures and Watt's tears are emblematic of the tragedy this presents.

It is from this point onwards Watt experiences an even greater loosening of his grip on the world. He of course ends up institutionalized, periodically inverting and destroying his language not so much out of choice, but seemingly rather as a by-product of his collapsed belief in the systems he used to order existence. Matthew Feldman's 2006 *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of the Interwar Notes* has repositioned our understanding of *Murphy* and *Watt's* critique of language. It had long been established that these early works were an engagement with Cartesianism and Geulincx in particular, but in the chapter "Myself I Cannot Save": Geulincx, Mauthner, Beckett' Feldman argues that Fritz Mauthner should be regarded as equally important in understanding them.

45 Daniel Katz, *Saying "I" No More* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 66.

46 *Damned to Fame*, p. 219. The translations and other additions within brackets in this quotation are from Knowlson himself.

Feldman summarises key Mauthnerian propositions illustrating Beckett's position as resting

somewhere between Geulincx's spiritual tabula rasa already cited in discussion of *Murphy* – exemplified by his ethical maxims, 'It is a requirement of Humility to compromise its own despicable negation' (TCD MS 10971/6/13.1) – and Mauthner's linguistic scepticism, which paradoxically points toward ineffability over three immense volumes of erudition finally signalling that the 'critique of language alone can unlock these gates [of truth] and show with friendly resignation that they lead from the world and thought into the void.'⁴⁷

Ineffability is the key term in Feldman's assessment of the meeting place between Mauthner and Beckett. As I have said, *Watt* is a novel about the realisation that language is unfit for purpose and that only by pulling apart its structure can we conceive of something greater. Looking again at Beckett's letter to Axel Kaun we examined in the introduction to the thesis the exact nature of this something else is somewhat of an unknown quantity. Beckett says of the writer's duty to question established modes of understanding like language,

As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.⁴⁸

Feldman re-explores a supposedly dead avenue in Beckett's reading of Mauthner, looking again to the archive and finding new evidence that conclusively proves he encountered Mauthner's *Kritik* (1901-1903) in 1938. However, rather than arguing this reading is the definitive key in understanding *Watt* he instead opts for a far more nuanced position, saying

Despite the remarkable correspondences between the two, it would be hasty to conclude that a decisive 'turn' in Beckett's approach to literature simply occurred upon reading Fritz Mauthner in 1938. Instead, such an evolving shift in focus had been cultivated

⁴⁷ Matthew Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of the Interwar Notes* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2006), p. 117.

⁴⁸ Samuel Beckett, 'German Letter of 1937' in *Disjecta* (London: John Calder, 1983), p. 172.

through Beckett's reading and notes for more than a decade.⁴⁹

As this thesis will attempt to demonstrate Beckett is a writer working with a core set of ideas that develop alongside advancements in his thinking which are then reflected in the work. Feldman illustrates this perfectly in the case of Mauthner, calling not for absolutes in our conception of Beckett's oeuvre, but rather for a tableau of influence and reflection that reifies, yet also evolves as the works progress. In the case of *Watt* older assessments of the importance of Mauthner take on a new authority once combined with Feldman's specific placing of Beckett's reading in '38. He asserts

Watt unmistakably betrays Beckett's reading of the *Kritik*. Here, [Jennie] Skerl's suggestion 30 years ago remains apt: 'The philosophical background of *Watt* must be reevaluated, placing Mauthner in the position of a dominant and informing influence whose "critique of language" provides the meaning of Watt's quest, struggle and failure.' 70 Moreover, Skerl's neglected reading bears reaffirming: Watt is a wholly Mauthnerian exercise, one largely recasting Beckett's earlier scepticism and angst into linguistic terms; indeed, 'Watt could be seen as an illustration of the inability of language to describe or explain reality and the inevitable failure of one who attempts to know truth through language. 71'⁵⁰

It is this ineffability Feldman stresses and, as he says, once one has acknowledged *Watt's* preoccupation with it then we can see the entire novel as about the crisis this presents. It is a realisation that plagues Watt and one the work shows to be of course endemic. As Paul Stewart emphasizes in *Zone of Evaporation: Beckett's Disjunctions* 'It is at Knott's house and in his service that Watt gradually feels reality to be slipping away from him as he desperately attempts to define and know phenomena through language.'⁵¹ Throughout the rest of the chapter we will look at further examples of the way this is manifested in the novel and furthermore if the conclusions it draws allow us to agree with Feldman's admission that 'the temptation to categorize Beckett as a Mauthnerian is virtually irresistible.'⁵²

49 Feldman, p. 145.

50 Ibid., p. 138.

51 Paul Stewart, *Zone of Evaporation: Samuel Beckett's Disjunctions* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2006), p. 72.

52 Feldman, p. 125.

What we can garner is that despite the direction *Watt*'s revelations take him toward, the truth or lack of truth uncovered is something Beckett understood all too well, and sought to render explicitly through his character and the book. *Watt* was finished during Beckett's experience of The Second World War, but it was of course a work harvested from a much larger manuscript he had been working on for some years. Although it would be the end of the war and a return to Dublin which would provide the time and location of the author's revelation in the storm⁵³, it is clear from this kind of extreme editing (the original *Watt* notebooks are over fifteen hundred pages long) that Beckett was already approaching a point where he saw reduction, the minimal and so forth as essential to his new process. This is something we shall explore in greater depth later but as Andrew Gibson writes in his essay 'Beckett and Badiou', 'The development of the work from at least *Watt* onwards can be plausibly described as involving a progressive diminution or elimination of artistic resources.'⁵⁴

The Symbiosis of Form and Content

In terms of the protracted composition of *Watt* though, the novel is dealing with somewhat old material for Beckett by the time he completed it. It is of course a progression from *Murphy* and especially *More Pricks Than Kicks*, however it is no where near as radical a departure from what has come before than the novellas, which we shall explore in the next chapter. This noted, it does not mean the revelation the book addresses is any less important. Indeed, it is an essential part of the process that leads the writer towards his

⁵³ This is the storm which lead to the already quoted epiphany, we have examined in the introduction. Namely that, 'I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.' *Damned to Fame*, p. 134.

⁵⁴ Andrew Gibson, 'Beckett and Badiou' in *Beckett and Philosophy* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) p. 95.

later work. Beckett has always stressed that in order for a work to reach its full potential it had to use form and content in a symbiotic manner, each working for the other. This can be manifested in several ways, from an illustrative relationship to a method in which the two are oppositional and their divergence creates new meaning altogether. The experimentation of Beckett's previous two novels has been well documented, and in particular *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* had a distinctly Joycean approach to form in the way it shifted with great frequency between various technical and stylistic devices. However, it is with *Watt* that we see the first committed attempt at making form work for the content and also be exemplary of the meaning the work is trying to instil.

Perhaps one of the most obvious examples of formal innovation within *Watt* is through the various ways the book overtly plays upon its own technical devices. Unlike the early modernists Beckett is not experimentally “breaking ground” and already has an immediate history of radical formal innovation to draw from and react against.⁵⁵ It is because of this history that *Watt's* refusal to take pains to suspend reader disbelief and attempt to create a bubble of artificiality for the work to exist within seems almost *de rigueur*. Considering the two previous novels Beckett had completed we take it as read that *Watt* will work, in everything from the knowing mode of narration, through to the characters and the settings of the work, at declaring itself a book and nothing more. Even a cursory survey of the novel's structure shows us two framing chapters that enclose the abstracted, wilfully artificial story of Watt. This wrapping of a traditional mode such as social comedy around

⁵⁵ An emblematic example of the kind of rupture in established literary modes I refer to here would be the development of the stream-of-consciousness first-person mode of narration. This was developed by many writers of the early twentieth century, including Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway*, but perhaps the most famous examples come from James Joyce's *Ulysses*. One could easily choose paradigmatic passages from Leopold Bloom or Stephen Dedalus, but the oft-quoted ending of the novel, in which we are offered passage inside the mind of Molly Bloom is an excellent example of the stylistic experimentation Beckett tries to follow. Joyce concludes his novel with '...shall I wear a red rose yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to day yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.' James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 732.

an equally artificial core of work helps to illustrate what we will look at in greater depth later, namely that despite their apparently variable levels of realism these forms are in essence both just examples of the distance fiction sits from anything fixed, truthful or real about the world.⁵⁶ In addition to this we also have the addenda at the close of the book. This material is a joke about the idea of a coda to what has just occurred, something that can centre and give definition to the ambiguities of the story. It is of course merely another set of questions for any of the answers one may discern in its pages. Furthermore its appearance and the footnote, 'The following precious and illuminating material should be carefully studied. Only fatigue and disgust prevented its incorporation.' (WA, p. 373.), suggest *Watt* is deliberately unfinished. It is a fragmentary piece that, like many twentieth century works is designed to feel it could go on indefinitely. This is something we shall return to later in the chapter when looking at Kafka's *The Castle* (1926).

The effect of these choices of narration is a general unsettling of modes and ideas fundamental to what we collectively understand by "the novel."⁵⁷ Rather than trying to proffer the illusion of reality, attain the suspension of disbelief and assert an objective power in the writer-reader relationship, *Watt* willingly undermines these, the novel being a series of fragments and powerless, subjective narratives. Collectively these point towards the content of the work: that truth, a fixed and unfaltering message explaining even the smallest aspect of existence is impossible, and the world is in fact ineffable. More specifically in terms of content there are various examples that can be broadly brought under an "antifictional" banner. This is to say that in their execution they purposefully

56 Stephen Connor argues in *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* that following on from *Murphy* this opening chapter of *Watt* is so much in the vein of the former work that it is almost a "writing out" necessary before Beckett can take on the new mode *Watt* consists of in the main.

57 Again it is wilfully ignorant to argue there are a shared set of assumptions that work as a base for all examples of the novel written in the English language. However, as true as this is, there are still a number of aspects of prose writing we can identify as being, by virtue of their frequent reappearances, central to a shared understanding of what one may expect from a novel. It is these safe assumptions that Beckett most often undermines through the aspects I go on to cite.

disrupt the fictional pretences that the novel suggests and to a limited extent works within. For example, we can look at an early part of the novel after Watt has departed the train and is on his way to Knott's. We find him resting in a ditch, fatigued and ill, and listening to a choir in the distance. He recounts, not by way of text alone, but by insertion of musical notation, the entire song he heard. The inclusion of not just the lyrics to the song, but also the accompanying music can best be described as purposefully unnecessary. There is a similar incident further on when Watt recalls the croaking made by some frogs. In that case the recounting is even more banal and adds less to the unfolding of the book than does the choir. These examples are sabotage of fiction. They disrupt not only our expectations of what a book should seek to accomplish and the message or meaning to be derived from it, but also in a wider context the very notion of fixed truth itself. Seen as isolated examples the effect of these devices may be debatable to the extent I have suggested. However, as we shall see (especially in the books to come) Beckett's work is a tapestry of meaning. Pulling out individual examples often leaves their meaning illusory or unconvincing, but when placed together with the rest of the text one can ascertain a much greater understanding of the accumulative effect the novel reaches.

John Pilling makes a very interesting point regarding the place of time within this snowball effect:

For Watt, Molloy, Moran, Malone, time has become more of a continuum, a kind of vacuum in which incidents occasionally happen, but so rarely that they cannot be satisfactorily related one to another. It is as if time has been lengthened; events of accepted importance happen with greater infrequency, throwing emphasis on events of lesser importance.⁵⁸

Those things we hold as most fixed and tangible in a novel, such as the importance of event are destabilised. Time becomes unstuck and whilst the novel follows a relatively linear path, it jumps from one moment in time to another, without an attempt being made

⁵⁸ John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge, 1976), p. 30.

to situate the reader. The events we focus upon are, as Pilling notes, those one would expect to be of the least importance, elevated to a position of dominance. The most notable of examples is surely that of the piano tuners who visit Mr. Knott's house whilst Watt is working there. In this episode Watt plays host to the father and son Gall, who 'are come, what is more, all the way from town, to choon the piano.' (WA, p. 223.) Watt is surprised to find on returning to the piano room with a tray of refreshments that the elder, blind piano tuner is standing in the middle of the room, whilst the son sits at the piano undertaking the task at hand. Sam describes this as 'perhaps the principal incident of Watt's early days in Mr. Knott's house.' (WA, p. 225.) The only indication that this incident is of greater significance than is suggested by the bareness of the prose is the following dialogue between the tuners:

The piano is doomed, in my opinion, said the younger.

The piano-tuner also, said the elder.

The pianist also, said the younger. (WA, p. 225.)

And yet, even this teasingly symbolic dialogue is so at odds with the detached, plain prose that it becomes almost comic; lines rehearsed for another book, that instead of containing subtextual meaning are again merely folded into the fabric of play and meaninglessness *Watt* addresses. In the chapter of his book which explores the comic within *Watt* Paul Stewart notes that

It is not that the comic undermines the more philosophical possibilities... but rather there is an aligning of the comic with the philosophical, an amalgam of the profound and the inane, a knotting of these two strands.⁵⁹

This example of the piano tuners seems to be emblematic of this recontextualising of the philosophical as comic and vice-versa. It is the principle incident of Watt's time at the house as it is essentially a meaningless encounter, with all the promise of fulfilment. Not only in the sense of the small false expectation the blind tuner will be working at the piano, but also their overly dramatic dialogue, which is invested with a false gravitas that

⁵⁹ Paul Stewart, p. 74.

becomes in its meaninglessness comic, as Stewart suggests. It is another example of the effect Knott's house has on Watt, the unravelling of his already fragile mind by the reinforcement he knows nothing and cannot ever know anything.

Further to this are the more explicitly metafictional elements of the book. Not only is *Watt* self-destructive through the range of devices it employs, but it is also highly self-aware, again using form and content together to shatter the illusion of a self-contained fictional world. As early as the first few pages a footnote indicates 'Much valuable space has been saved, in this work, that would otherwise have been lost, by avoidance of the plethoric reflexive pronoun after say.' (WA, p. 172.) Firstly, the inclusion of a footnote is relevant because like the examples we have looked at already, it displaces the fictional context of the novel form and brings in a type of reference usually reserved for non-fictional work. Then the content of the footnote, which refers to 'this work', immediately shattering the fictional bubble and drawing attention to the artifice of the work. Another key example in this regard are some of the typographical anomalies which plague the novel. At many points there will simply be a question mark where the next part of the story should have been. These gaps in the manuscript occur sporadically and of course declare themselves as fiction even more so than the regular text of the book. We can see in an example from around two thirds of the way through *Watt* that Beckett is in fact flagrant about the way this supposed intervention into the illusion of reality disrupts fictional pretence. Rather than just the single question mark we have seen before, on this occasion we have four question marks over two lines and arranged in a pattern for no reason other than to play upon the concepts of "created reality" and "fictional truth". These oxymoronic terms are indicative of the language one is forced into using when describing the effect Beckett's formal devices have.

On a wider level, by the sheer wealth of material we are dealing with these formal innovations suggest that the very act of trying to comprehend and explain the world is to create or falsify reality. In this way it could be argued the book is in fact proto-deconstructionist in methodology, as rather than posit a new equally artificial means to make sense of existence, its final position is illustrative in revealing all truth to be fictional. Here Mauthner again seems relevant. Feldman addresses truth very directly when he notes of Mauthner's philosophy 'Put simply, language is intrinsically metaphorical, and in consequence cannot describe experiences or states of affairs with accuracy; that is, language is capable of saying nothing about lived experience, but only about itself.'⁶⁰ By making even the idea of the manuscript Sam is writing an object to be incorporated into the frivolity of fictional pretence Beckett is completely availing himself of any responsibility to the layering of objective realities within the text. Paul Stewart notes this process is part of what he calls "narrative disjunctions", which is to say the various techniques of the novel that seem to offer narrative fulfilment, only to deny the reader any certainty. He argues that Sam as narrator is part of a destabilising hierarchy that rises right the way up to the historical figure of Beckett himself:

However, the presence of Sam as narrator increases throughout the novel, until he is finally revealed in the third chapter, thereby complicating any simple identification of the narrative voice with that of the author, Beckett.⁶¹

One can see that in *Watt* all areas, even those he initially creates as hierarchically emboldening a greater degree of truth than another will become equally valid for play.

In addition to these metafictional elements of the novel we also have the heavily featured possibility lists.⁶² These were also present in *Murphy* but are taken much further in *Watt*,

⁶⁰ Feldman, p. 139.

⁶¹ Paul Stewart, p. 85.

⁶² These 'possibility lists' as I have labelled them are a collective term for the parts of Beckett's novels in

with an appearance almost every few pages. Of all the technical innovations the novel employs these are surely the most notable due to both their audaciousness and their ability to frustrate. An early example of this listing occurs when Watt first arrives at Knott's house and is perplexed by the back door suddenly being open. The narrator recounts that

Watt was surprised to find the back door, so lately locked, now open. Two explanations of this occurred to him. The first was this, that his science of the locked door, so seldom at fault, had been so on this occasion, and that the back door, when he had found it locked, had in effect been locked, but had subsequently been opened, from within, or without, by some person, while he Watt had been employed in going, to and fro, from the back to the front door, and from the front door to the back door. (WA, p. 197.)

This, one of the first occurrences, is relatively brief in comparison to the possibility lists we find further into the novel. Towards the end of *Watt* these lists become a real disruption to the book's progress, often spanning several pages and filled with repetitive and sometimes redundant content.⁶³ We have for example in Arthur's telling of the story of Mr Louit and the supposedly mathematically savant Mr Nackybal the exchange of looks between members of the university board, which over several pages traces the minutiae of their crossed glances. Perhaps the pinnacle of the device, in terms of absolute redundancy to the semblance of plot the novel engenders occurs later when the narrator describes firstly Mr. Knott's movement in his room and then the re-arrangement of furniture within said room. If we take merely a few lines from this part of the book the effect of these lists is clear enough: '...from the bed to the window; from the window to the bed; from the bed to the fire; from the fire to the door; from the door to the fire.' (WA, p. 335.) and so forth. In *Saying I No More* Daniel Katz defines his own reading as encompassing some of the elements we have already discussed, but as being primarily concerned with the role of the

which he examines a usually very simple or trivial proposition through an examination of its constituent elements. They are not a uniformly homogeneous group and they address a variety of subjects through differing level of exhaustiveness, however they are bound by the way they disrupt the text, usually presenting the reader with purposefully banal and repetitive detail one would expect to be summarised. Again, there is variety in their purpose, but they are broadly aimed at a mocking of systems that would seek to explain and understand the world through fixed structures, such as language.

⁶³ This is a claim that one hesitates to make, and does not in any way constitute a criticism of *Watt*. The device is of course designed to create an overly repetitive effect, and one which frustrates and undermines reader expectation in equal measure.

individual within the world. He argues,

The book is neither a simple critique of Cartesian “rationalism” nor an anthropological inquiry into cultural practice, patriarchy, and the foundation of law, but rather an attempt to think subjectivity as ritual, ritual as method, and method as neurosis, in a chain which would refuse to label neurosis as simply a rhetorical response to desire.⁶⁴

If we look at these previous examples from Katz's perspective we can see in these possibility lists attempts to try and understand one's own existence by processing experiences in a rigorous and methodological manner. The chain he mentions is interesting because it suggests a process that explains the seemingly arbitrary acts Watt, Knott and some of the other characters engage in and a final, psychological manifestation that he is keen for us not to dismiss. The neurosis comes from an awareness we have already discussed, that of an absence of meaning that seems to become, for Watt, more and more pervasive in his thought and actions as the novel progresses. Katz articulates this whilst looking at the example of the piano tuners, which we have already touched upon. He notes that:

Thus, the general process for which the Galls provide the model and which is also the model for most processes generally undertaken by Watt, might be called *gallicization* – that is, the need to foist a meaning where there is none through the creation of a ritual narrative.⁶⁵

We can see then that the neurosis that manifests itself, that indeed pushes Watt towards Mr. Knott's house, before pushing him into an asylum and seemingly breaking his mind and body is born from an awareness that a final, complete knowledge of even the smallest aspect of one's existence is an impossibility. In *Watt* the process is seen through the prism of agency, as in the actions these characters try and complete to assert meaning to their subjectivity. It is also mirrored in the language which in its repetitions describes these and forms the content of the book.

⁶⁴ Daniel Katz, p. 49.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

Again one is reminded of Mauthner and a note Beckett took on the *Kritik*. He says

I would like to hold on to the basic idea of this book. It raises the question whether a language is more or less suited to allow its speaker to recognise the world. On this point, of course all the results of comparative linguistics sink to the level of a game children play with coloured pebbles.⁶⁶

As I have tried to show, *Watt* can often feel very prescient of poststructuralist concerns and nowhere is this more evident than in the reaction to the inadequacies of language. Language's sacrosanct state is undermined, not with rhetoric, but with the kind of deconstructionist play we shall examine as key to later Beckett works. How far this goes and how far we are willing to take it is open to debate. Paul Stewart suggests that

By so straining the language through comic disjunction and displacement, there is, perhaps, an brief glimpse of the joyous horror which lies beyond language and beyond life; that indefinable something which may be indefinable nothing. Through the comic, Watt may almost succeed in effing the ineffable.⁶⁷

This may perhaps be a step too far. The suggestion that in *Watt's* method Beckett manages to go beyond language as it were is appealing, but most likely stretching the scope of the book's achievement. It seems to me that what is poststructuralist about *Watt* is the relentlessness of the attempts to break down and show as hollow the very idea of meaning through language. To then go further and say that it manages to begin articulating something beyond language is an exaggeration at this point, but something which we shall examine in later chapters as the works develop and evolve.

These possibility lists share the same characteristics in a focus on banal, unnecessary information, a commitment to unrelenting thoroughness of eliminating possibilities and of course their collective effect which is usually a halt to any sort of momentum the story had been building. Stephen Connor in a somewhat ironic fashion actually formalises the varying forms of these possibility lists, noting that on the one hand there are finite

⁶⁶ Feldman, p. 141.

⁶⁷ Paul Stewart, p. 96.

permutations, in which the number of possibilities is restricted: 'structure predominates over sequence'⁶⁸, and then those which allows limitless possibilities (such as the sequence of servants in Knott's house) or Arsene's 'praise of the earth, which has been his mother and his father's and his mother's mother's...' ⁶⁹ Here 'sequence asserts itself beyond the control of structure.'⁷⁰ Connor suggests that what this leads to is a novel that seems impossible to enclose or finish as is suggested by Beckett's use of the addenda section.

These lists consciously or unconsciously echo a similar device found in Kafka's *The Castle*. In Kafka's novel, K, the protagonist, is an Everyman who we follow into deeper and deeper spheres of confusion as he tries to understand and live on the fringes of the castle. In the following quotation we find K discussing his situation with one of the many bureaucrats who make up the administration of the castle and the village:

'Oh, Superintendent,' said K., 'now again you're taking far too simple a view of the case. I'll enumerate for your benefit a few of the things that keep me here: the sacrifice I made in leaving my home, the long and difficult journey, the well-grounded hopes I built on my engagement here, my complete lack of means, the impossibility after this of finding some other suitable job at home, and last but not least my fiancée, who lives here.'⁷¹

In *The Castle* there are many examples like this where K will separate his problems into their constituent parts, addressing his interlocutor and the reader simultaneously. The effect though is an emphasis of the relative simplicity we find in understanding these situations, in contrast to the ever spiralling maelstrom of bureaucracy and misinformation that greets K at every juncture. This opposition of the intelligible and the unintelligible does not exist in *Watt*. Rather, the protagonist has fallen victim to the world. From the very start he mirrors the unknowability and attendant confusion of the world with the symptoms he displays of this condition worsening as the chronology of the novel

⁶⁸ Connor, p. 31.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

⁷¹ Franz Kafka, *The Castle* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 75.

progresses. For Beckett intelligibility is non-existent. He does not even tolerate the illusion and instead has Watt as a different kind of Everyman; an Everyman representative of the true state in which we live, unable to transcend the limitations of our meagre understanding and disabled by this, whether we realise it or not. This is to say we are all Watt in the sense we have all been failed by the systems that profess to enclose and explain the world. We may not suffer the tragic effects this dawning awareness has on Watt, but we are all hampered from attaining any sort of truth whilst we approach the world through the tools of language and structure these early novels seek to disarm of power.

A Response to Logical Positivism?

As stated earlier *Watt* is an exercise in illustration. Beckett rarely approaches a didactic register throughout the novels and despite the emergence of the “Beckett and philosophy” field of studies the appearance of a direct reference to a specific writer or argument are noteworthy due to their infrequency. Beckett instead uses a method in which the choices he makes over everything from character, narrative presentation to generic convention work to illustrate the novel's response to fundamental ideas of how we interpret the world, and the philosophical traditions that have shaped that interpretation. These possibility lists are one of the strongest examples within the tapestry of effect that is created and demonstrate the dawning epiphany that the multifarious ways we interpret the world are equally and irreparably flawed by their shared base. However, it is also within these possibility lists we can see the strongest evidence of a charge often aimed specifically at Beckett's third novel; namely, that it is specifically a critique of logical positivism. This now marginalised philosophical movement originated in the nineteen-twenties and thirties through a group of thinkers known as the Vienna circle, who formulated a new doctrine in opposition to metaphysics. Oswald Hanfling summarises the foundations of the

philosophy by describing the fundamental belief that 'all genuine questions must be capable of scientific treatment, and all genuine knowledge part of a single system of science.'⁷² Indeed, logical positivism was the name coined, but many, including key proponent Rudolf Carnap, preferred the term 'logical empiricism' due to the more central emphasis this placed on observable phenomena. The backbone of the movement was the verification theory of meaning 'according to which the meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification.'⁷³ In this sense then abstracted terms or that in language which does not have observable, tangible links to "the real world" are dismissed as nonsensical and the meaning of something is entirely dependent on its ability to be verified by scientific methodology. This notion was borrowed and modified from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), a work whose author the movement would come to be associated with despite his minor, fringe involvement. In later years Ludwig Wittgenstein would in fact distance himself from the movement, unhappy not only with its inflexibility, but also with the arrogant, self-righteous manner it asserted itself as the solution to the problem of metaphysics.

For its claim to provide a solution to the problems of metaphysical speculation alone one can see why Beckett would take an interest in the movement and of course, as we have seen thus far, his scepticism was increased by its reliance on formulations based around empirical observation. In his book *Samuel Beckett: A New Approach*, G.C. Bernard notes the history of critics who have seen Beckett's novel specifically in this light, writing 'some readings of *Watt* tend to see it as an expression of the failure of logical positivism, or as an exploration of the implications of the structuralist tenet that reality is linguistic.'⁷⁴ He draws specifically from Levy citing the following key idea: 'Watt's predicament as a kind

⁷² Oswald Hanfling, *Logical Positivism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), p. 2.

⁷³ Hanfling, p. 4.

⁷⁴ G.C. Bernard, *Samuel Beckett: A New Approach* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1970), p. 91.

of post-structuralist yearning for a place where naive faith in the power of language to explain external phenomenon can once more be satisfied.⁷⁵ The concurrence with Feldman's suggestion of Beckett as a Mauthnerian is again apparent. As I have suggested the completion of the book was long after Beckett's dispensing with the kind of structural model logical positivism is an example of, but as Levy notes the author is still wounded from the realisation. He has Watt unable to find a solution to fill the vacuum left by their failure and hopelessly turning backwards, seeking resolution where none exists. Of course logical positivism is a movement that has been in decline for many decades, but for Beckett one can see why this type of contemporary solution would frustrate him. *Watt* is therefore distinct from *Dream* and *Murphy*, which are often critical of the metaphysical tradition and yet operate within a type of reverent mode towards the thinking that shaped Beckett's own. In *Watt* he expresses just how scornful he is of a movement which would attempt to replace the failures in metaphysics with a regressive empiricism. Returning to the text, it is these possibility lists which would seem to be the kind of aspect that has lead critics to focus upon logical positivism as the novel's most direct critique. They operate as pastiche, or more specifically a gentle ribbing of the idea that linguistics and logic, that eliminating numeric possibilities can be an effective way to ascertain truth. By applying these stringent methods to the mundane, to that which does not demand attention or that which is base and crude Beckett signals his intent. *Watt* is an exercise in scepticism; its playful nature is in fact a grim plea for a form which does not assume the hierarchical power of language, mathematics, dry logic and empirical observation. This is, as its core, the driving force of the book. Although it will be in subsequent works Beckett truly forges his own means of writing within the chaos of understanding, this work is the declaration of dissatisfaction; the rendering of a moment in which what has come before is over and over berated for its insufficiency and inaccuracy. As we have said, the completion of *Watt* was a

75 Bernard, p. 91.

process of extreme editing rather than addition. Beckett turned what could have been a sprawling epic into something altogether more simple and emblematic of the central realisation which allows him to move into new fertile territory in the future.

It is therefore a process of replacement we see repeated in the novel. Watt and indeed the reader are again and again confronted with the failure of logic and structure and the subsequent surfacing of unknowability. As John Keller writes 'Central to the book is the 'unknowability' of Knott, and 'unknowability' permeates the work itself, creating confusion within the reader that reflects the emotional and cognitive state of the main character.'⁷⁶ Keller highlights the way Watt, and vicariously the reader, are assaulted by this expanse of unknowability: an absence of answers, a mocking of the systems that try to fix the world in place and the meaninglessness of that which is observable. James Williams writes that 'in noting a repeated pattern of signs the structuralist scientist hopes to arrive at some secure understanding.'⁷⁷ This could be a description of *Watt's* possibility lists. They express the satirical imitation of logical positivism that comes from the frustration over the limitations of structural philosophy.

Watt's stay at Mr. Knott's is a constant barrage of reaffirmation. At every juncture he faces absurd logic, events that defy meaning, hidden answers and hidden questions. Watt faces this unintelligibility head-on, expecting nothing more from the world. We can see this in his decision to simply sit and listen to Arsene's speech when he arrives at the house. Throughout this thirty page spiel of sometimes unintelligible advice (prefaced by the wry comment 'Before leaving he made the following short statement.'^(WA, p. 199.)) our protagonist remains the perpetual observer, disinclined to intercede and question the manner of

⁷⁶ John Keller, *Samuel Beckett and the Primacy of Love* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 90.

⁷⁷ James Williams, *Understanding Poststructuralism* (Chesham: Acumen, 2005), p. 2.

meaning in Arsene's "short statement". Of the information revealed one of the pieces emblematic of the absurd logic which governs the world of Mr. Knott's house is the description of the rotational method of employment within it. As we will have confirmed later the house always has three occupants: 'the master, whom as you well know we call Mr. Knott; a senior retainer named Vincent, I believe; and a junior, only in the sense that he was of more recent acquisition, named, if I am not mistaken, Walter.' (WA, p. 213.) Arsene then explains that Mr. Knott is fixed and permanent, whilst the two employees will be rotated, with the new arrival heralding both the leaving of the senior retainer and the promotion of the junior retainer to the senior post. This process seemingly has no authoritative basis in that Mr. Knott does not dismiss or hire anyone. Indeed, there is no discussion at all of money or employment between Knott and his "retainers" as they are called. It is as if the men are simply drawn to the house, to consume some time and then with the arrival of a new resident they willingly leave, understanding their time is up. In examples such as these Beckett is striking blows against comfortable notions of structure; of a world which ideas such as the verifiability principle could encompass and explain. Mauthner refutes the ambition of this kind of philosophy arguing that all philosophy can aspire to is language criticism. On the other hand the arbitrary logic of *Watt's* world is a pastiche of the incomplete methods we have to comprehend the world, and yet it is not a dismissal of the notion of comprehension in its entirety. Beckett is sceptical, but he is not dismissive. Like the deconstruction movement to come the work seems to suggest that through the method of dismantling established structure a defogging of the glass through which we view the world can be achieved. The book does not offer answers, but through its method a direction can be ascertained. Beckett's later works will vastly expand upon these notions, but *Watt* is the first to move into these areas and show the path to follow.

Philosophy as a Physical Concern

Examples such as this litter the work. In the description of the disposal of Mr. Knott's unwanted food we are given the story of the dog employed to undertake the task and the brutal family history of Art and Con, the two men who own the animal. Kate, as the dog has been named, is the sixth Kate employed for that purpose and again in the precision of the system used for ensuring the trivial task of disposing Mr. Knott's food we find a mocking of logic, its attention turned towards something cruel, pointless and based on a wish we are never even sure Mr. Knott has expressed. Beckett lowers logic into the grime of the world, and does not allow it to be clean in the way it needs to be in order to function. Instead it is forced to face the ways it misunderstands the universe and only partially recognises how things work. In the end this confirmation of the failure of any system, metaphysical or otherwise turns Watt into a creature plagued by their insufficiencies. Sam describes the way he and Watt met, interned within different wings of a psychiatric hospital and exchanging conversation in the garden when their differing tastes in weather overlapped. By this stage Watt has drifted even further from his flimsy hold on patterns of behaviour, language, and interaction than when he left Mr. Knott's house. Sam is forced to translate Watt's speech from the various inverted forms it takes. Furthermore, Watt has taken to dressing himself back-to-front and walking backwards everywhere. He has become a reversed man, not so much holding a new faith over systems made opposite, but rather broken by his awareness of an incomprehensible world and the time spent thinking he understood it.

Indeed, all of the characters within Watt's world seem broken in one way or another. In most this spiritual or emotional disintegration is mirrored in physical deformity. This aspect of *Watt* bleeds from the central chapters of the novel out into the framing device of

the opening and closing. Mr Hackett is the first figure we encounter and one could be forgiven for thinking they are encountering the novel's protagonist, characterised in the archetypal Beckettian manner, by his agitated walk and poor health. However, if Hackett has a strange manner of progression then Watt himself must have a series of movements that trumps this. Early on Beckett takes time to describe

Watt's way of advancing due east, for example, was to turn his bust as far as possible towards the earth and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south and at the same time to fling out his left leg as far as possible towards the north, and so on, over and over again, many many times, until he reached his destination, and could sit down. (WA, p. 191.)

This incredibly protracted way of walking is, as we shall find out later, not unusual for Watt and seemingly a reflection of the mental preoccupations of his character. The question of choice is not addressed but if we look to the scenes of Watt and Sam in the garden it seems that the former is often unaware of the strange way his speech has mutated. Even if he is aware that turning around and walking forwards would stop him hurting himself or, in this example we are looking at, that to walk normally would allow him to reach his destination much more efficiently, it is as if he is compelled to move in this way. One gets the sense that the hopeless search for a halt to the awareness deteriorating his faith in the possibility of action within the world has manifested itself physically. So, for Watt, it is not a question of choice in his walking this way, but rather he simply must. Watt's despair at never being able to fully trust his understanding of the world means that even the empirical assumption he could perambulate normally is laced with uncertainty. *Watt* is a tragicomedy of a man broken by his awareness of unknowability. The weight of it ensures his most basic assumptions, to the extent of his ability to walk in a straight line, one foot in front of another, pain him.

Watt is not an abstract vehicle for indulgent philosophical questioning. It attempts to show

that these issues effect the most real and tangible of our interactions and we can see this reinforced at every stage of the novel. Directly after leaving the train station Watt, first assaulted by Lady Mcann, feels weak and takes refuge in a ditch beside the road. There is no direct reflection but here he vomits before moving on. It is as if the crumbling of his mind is being matched by his body. This base physicality of his character is described on several occasions with one of the most notable examples coming later in the novel in the lengthy description of the preparation of Mr. Knott's food. The description of the cooking suggests something of Watt is passing directly into Mr. Knott:

This was a task that taxed Watt's powers, both of mind and body, to the utmost, it was so delicate, and rude. And in warm weather it sometimes happened, as he mixed, stripped to the waist, and plying with both hands the great iron rod, that tears would fall, tears of mental fatigue, from his face, into the pot, and from his chest, and out from under his arms, beads of moisture, provoked by his exertions, into the pot also. (WA, p. 238.)

Beckett's novel consistently creates this mirroring of the physical and the mental. At times it seems he is simply reinforcing the idea that the metaphysical degeneration the novel addresses is as real and worrying as the physical deterioration it sits alongside. The most extended example of the detailing of physicality and the more base aspects of life surely comes in the form of Art and Con's family, the Lynches. If we are just to take a small section from the description we find in the novel one can see a pattern emerging:

There was Tom Lynch, widower, aged eighty-five years, confined to his bed with constant undiagnosed pains in the caecum, and his three surviving boys Joe, aged sixty-five years, a rheumatic cripple, and Jim, aged sixty-four years, a hunchback inebriate, and Bill, widower, aged sixty-three years, greatly hampered in his movements by the loss of both legs as the result of a slip... (WA, p. 249.)

This listing of each family member and their respective ailments does not suggest everyone is aware of the crisis of confidence that has befallen Watt, but rather that this inability to know anything assuredly is fundamental to all and in the world of the novel has found expression through their physicality.

Returning to Watt's preparation of Knott's food and his entering Knott's body through his sweat, one can again see a physical expression of a philosophical concern. Beckett has Watt physicalise the central question of the novel their relationship represents. Watt is of course representative of a general "what?", an asking not of the "big questions", but the possibilities of asking these questions in the first place. Throughout this he will be faced with the impenetrable wall of Mr. Knott's "not". Again and again Watt will search for the possibility of structure, of meaning to the chaos of existence and the answer will ring out the same. Beckett makes this physical in the episode with Watt's sweat entering Knott's body. As always it will be indifference that meets Watt's plea. Despite the variety in these physical episodes the illustrative point is the same. There is the tragedy of Watt in the incapability of unknowability which finally breaks him, physically and mentally. Then there is the broader finality of the fact we must all live in a perpetual state of ignorance for as long as we seek definitive answers using the structures of language and accepted philosophy that have failed us. In the novel Beckett has these physical spread out from Watt as an endemic condition we all must face and suggests that if we are to insist on futile attempts at totalising systems of knowledge we may as well focus them open the sweat, the stink and the infirmities of the body.

Religion as Replacement Metaphysics

If Watt can find no solace in the possibility of structure he equally finds none in the idea of religion as replacement. This novel is Beckett's most explicit in terms of its critiquing of religion. This is not pursued in a straightforward, descriptive way; no doubt something Beckett would have found distasteful or clichéd. Rather it is achieved via the techniques of allegory and allusion. *Watt* as a novel is not whole-heartedly committed to either of these, but at various points it does aim a barb at religion, signalling that the absence of meaning is

not a space to be filled with faith, but often showing the journey for salvation to be as fraught with difficulties as any other. In the broadest sense this can be seen in Watt's journey to Knott, which many have recognised as a kind of existential pilgrimage.⁷⁸ This journey is done for the sake of Watt's salvation, for the hope that at the end of it he can find a greater connection to the system governing the world. One can see the similarities to a religious pilgrimage, but of course for Watt there is the difference in that he has already, to a degree, convinced himself of the absence of meaning and to the futility of his journey.

When Watt and Sam later meet in the garden, there is a distinctly biblical feeling to the events. Firstly, the setting is important. Beckett chooses to have Watt and Sam meet in the expansive garden of the institute they occupy. The author is of course aware that any mention of a garden within a work of fiction has certain connotations, but it is the activities the two engage in that confirms the allusion. Sam describes their interactions with the animals of the garden:

Birds of every kind abounded, and these it was our delight to pursue, with stones and clods of earth. Robins, in particular, thanks to their confidingness, we destroyed in great numbers. And larks' nests, laden with eggs still warm from the mother's breast, we ground into fragments, under our feet, with peculiar satisfaction, at the appropriate season, of the year. (WA, p. 294.)

Sam then goes on to describe how he and Watt would take small pieces of food, birds' eggs and small animals and feed them to the rats of the garden. He ends by recalling this particular act of cruelty:

Or seizing suddenly a plump young rat, resting in our bosom after its repast, we would feed it to its mother, or its father, or its brother, or its sister, or to some less fortunate relative. It was on these occasions, we agreed, after an exchange of views, that we came closest to God. (WA, p. 295.)

Firstly, the tone of these sections is important. Much like in *Murphy* Beckett enjoys subverting reader response with a disjunction of tone and content. An event, like the

⁷⁸ In *Samuel Beckett and the Primacy of Love* John Keller notes that Watt's pilgrimage yields no salvation, but only 'the impossibility of knowledge.' Keller, p. 91.

destruction of birds' nests or the feeding of animals to each another, strikes one as the actions of a sociopath, done as it is purely for self-gratification. However, rather than present this in a condemning manner, Beckett chooses to tell it as a warm, jovial episode. We are with Sam throughout and like Watt he is not a detached, enigmatic narrator. He is entirely subjective, and part of the confusing, often brutal world of *Watt*, playing an active roll through his narration and his actions. The way that the section ends is also significant. Describing their activities as the closest they come to God is as explicit as Beckett gets regarding the Biblical overtones of the episode. He is essentially portraying an inverted Garden of Eden, a post-lapsarian garden in which two menacing, bizarre men replace Adam and Eve. Instead of living in harmony with the animals they crush them underfoot and aid in their cannibalisation. There is an allegorical purpose behind this. Despite the knowing cruelty played upon by the mismatched tone, the two men are not actually disrupting the natural order in the way one may initially think. In a Darwinian, survival of the fittest sense, the animal kingdom is determined as much by cruelty and cannibalism as the nurturing of the young. Beckett presents us with an ideal in order to discredit it and in this case the ideal is the Book of Genesis, the first of the Old Testament. He shows that any structure, any fixed way of understanding will inevitably be made to look foolish simply by the arbitrary and chaotic nature of the world. In this instance the system is even easier to attack as it first posits a scene of structural bliss before a rupture that brought into place the world as we know it. For Beckett this is not just hopeful, but foolishly so. He is equally sceptical of the notion that we can ignore the numerous holes in how we presently structure the world by virtue of a higher power. Though this theological system is different to more philosophical targets by virtue of its reliance on faith for example, the two are united in *Watt* as prescribed solutions for the unresolvable questions of existence.

These ideas are again brought to the fore a few pages later. Again Sam and Watt meet, although this time Watt has taken to doing everything inverted and so arrives, walking backwards, injured from the numerous falls he has taken. Sam notes,

His face was bloody, his head also, and thorns were in his scalp. (His resemblance, at that moment, to the Christ beloved by Bosch, then hanging in Trafalgar Square, was so striking, that I remarked it.) (WA, p. 298.)

In this instance Beckett invokes the New Testament, aligning Watt with Jesus Christ. Again, the very idea that the physically deformed, morally bankrupt, detached figure of Watt could be a modern saviour is one that works perfectly as part of the tapestry of inversions and corruptions comprising the novel. We have the idea of the second coming but of the saviour as the man who is the most truthful for his time, unashamed by his lack of knowledge and in fact promoting a kind of fruitless search for a system he knows does not exist and a replacement he doubts even the possibility of. Following this description of Watt, Sam goes on to say that the two facing each other, fence dividing them into their separate parts of the garden and pavilions are mirror images. He directly echoes how he has just described Watt: 'For if anyone, at that time, could be truly said not to resemble the Christ supposed by Bosch, then hanging in Trafalgar Square, I flatter myself it was I.' (WA, p. 298.) This identification of himself with the Christ-like appearance of Watt is intriguing as it both suggests we are all truly in the absence of structure that so plagues him, and yet also connotes that we may be so without appearing that way.

This religious symbolism is evident throughout the novel and explicit enough to infer a good deal of significance. Outwith the examples from the garden the most intriguing is from the period in which Watt first arrives at the house of Mr. Knott near the beginning of the novel. The following description illustrates the importance of religious imagery to Beckett during this time and indeed throughout his work:

He set down his bags beside him, on the beautiful red floor, and he took off his hat, for he had reached his destination, discovering his scant red hair, and laid it on the table beside him. And a pretty picture they made, Watt's scalp and red-grey tufts, and the floor burning up, from below. (WA, p. 198.)

This hellish imagery is startling, presented as it is in the typically Beckettian fashion as something light-hearted. We first have Watt's red hair, which in and of itself has no specific connotations. However, when the red floor is associated with it by virtue of it 'burning up, from below' we get an entirely different idea. It is as if Watt has arrived in hell, as if the floor has opened up and revealed its true nature to him. In fact, we get the impression his scalp is ablaze, consumed by the fire rising from the floor. Yet the invocation of hell is not actually the biblical idea Watt's time at Mr. Knott's most readily invokes. This period of transition, of necessary time served before progression, is in fact more reminiscent of Purgatory, another place that has long been associated with fire but in a different manner. Watt is not in his final location, so we can assume Mr. Knott's house is not hell. The process of purgatory is that of a painful, suffering cleansing in which one is purged of the sins of life in order to be admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven. Watt's time at Mr. Knott's is certainly transitory, one in which he attempts to free himself of that he has come to know in order to attain a measure of peace and understanding. However, as one would expect of Beckett, the purgatorial analogy shifts in the outcome. Rather than ridding himself of sin, Watt sheds the last of his belief in knowledge and the possibilities of understanding, losing his grip on reality and being institutionalised. If we are thinking in terms of influence here the most obvious work is Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*. There is no doubt this imagery takes much from the middle volume *Purgatory*. In forthcoming chapters we shall examine Beckett's relationship with Dante in greater detail including this early example from *Watt*.

If *Watt* is a novel concerned with the moment one realises that no matter how well-

structured a system is for making sense of the world, it is doomed by virtue of its own nature, then the following quotation by John Pilling exemplifies the ways in which Beckett chooses to illustrate his point:

Watt's rationalism is really 'solution clapped on problem like a snuffer on a candle': the book suffers from being too clear, too allegorical; far from there being no symbols where none intended', there are symbols everywhere inviting us, like Watt, to explain and exorcize.⁷⁹

Pilling is not suggesting that Beckett is ignorant of the multitude of symbolic content we find within *Watt*, but rather that the phrase 'no symbols where none intended' is as much of a joke as the description of Arsene's "short statement" we have already discussed. Again, it is to illustrate this central awareness of unknowability that is the prerequisite for events devoid of meaning, logical positivism applied to that which is tedious and mundane, and symbols that shift from their apparent meaning. All of these promise fulfilment and yet reveal themselves as something entirely at odds with the initial preconception.

An Unknowable Meaning

If we have so far been discussing the substance of *Watt*, that which the material throws at us time and time again, then is this also the conclusion the novel draws? Unknowability is something we have mentioned in passing, but requires elaboration to understand how it works in relation to the novel's final message, if a work by Beckett could so neatly be summarised. We do not have to wait until the closing pages to find the endpoint Watt reaches in his stay with Mr. Knott. Relatively early there is a moment of narrative intervention in which Sam lets the reader know that

Watt learned towards the end of his stay in Mr. Knott's house to accept that nothing had happened, that a nothing had happened, learned to bear it and even, in a shy way, to like it. But then it was too late. (WA, p. 231.)

This idea of not just nothing happening, but "a nothing", an event that occurs but is

⁷⁹ Pilling, p. 35.

resistant to explanation is of course what we have been looking at already. Eventually Watt will be driven mad by his inability to move past this stage and achieve a greater degree of understanding, but is unknowability the endpoint in terms of the novel? As John Pilling notes Watt's development is arrested and 'The broken, backward-talking figure of the end is the same genuine figure of pathos he was at the beginning.'⁸⁰ We may feel sorry for Watt and note that the crumbling of his psyche is tragic. However as I have mentioned there is no catharsis for him, no moment in which he attains a greater awareness or even the possibility of greater awareness. Yet, the book itself does not share in this despair. *Watt* is a novel about acute frustration over an awareness that the myriad ways which we can organise the chaos of existence are equally flawed by their very nature. Yet, the book is not simply an exercise in hopelessness; it points towards the possibility of radically different methods and can be seen as proto-poststructuralist in two key ways.

In his book *Understanding Poststructuralism* James Williams speaks of the poststructuralist idea of the limit and the core. He notes

the claim is that the limit is the core[...] No poststructuralist defines the limit as something knowable (it would merely become another core). Rather, each poststructuralist thinker defines the limit as a version of pure difference, in the sense of something that defies identification.⁸¹

If we compare this notion to the structure of *Watt* we can see distinct similarities. In Beckett's novel one may assume the core is the central part of the novel, which deals with Watt's time at Mr. Knott's and the issues of existence most directly. This would make the limits the pieces of social comedy that frame the core, but even this is an inversion of a traditional textual hierarchy, with the established, more realist sections being forced to the margins. However, a simple reversal of core and limit presupposes the core and as Williams notes 'the limit is the core'. In *Watt* neither of these types of writing has an

⁸⁰ Pilling, p. 34.

⁸¹ Williams, p. 2.

authoritative predominance, but instead they are both equally unknowable and exist as defining each other and as both in fact unsettled and sitting on the limit. One thinks of the deconstructionist notion of the endless chain of absent signification, with “pure difference” prevailing over a tangible core. It can of course be argued that this type of thinking leads to either relativism or nihilism, two forms that are seemingly undesirable due to their distance from any sort of solution. However, I think we are not stretching too far to see *Watt* as an early example of a work that seeks to disrupt accepted belief to the end of exposing its insufficiencies and in this methodology gain a greater insight as to which direction we should be progressing. As Williams highlights,

Poststructuralism is not against this and for that – once and for all. It is for the affirmation of an inexhaustible productive power of limits. It is for the resulting positive disruption of settled oppositions.⁸²

The relationship between Beckett's work and Jacques Derrida is something that will be explored fully in later chapters. However, even in this early work, we can see why Derrida would resist deconstructing Beckett's work on the grounds of its ability to deconstruct itself.⁸³ Ideas such as the opening up of presence, the 'point when a text finds its most pure truth'⁸⁴ are there in the predominance of minor occurrences, the prevalence of the limit as the mode in which the book operates and the fully-fledged disruption of fictional pretence.

The second distinctly poststructuralist aspect of *Watt* is the idea of “play” we have examined. As revolutionary and experimental a novel as it is, it still remains recognisable as conforming to certain prerequisites of the form. Prerequisites such as approximate length, prose content and a beginning, middle and end (literally, if not philosophically). Deconstruction works not autonomously, but from the inside out, exploring and exposing the inherent traces the work already possesses. Rather than being something we must

⁸² Ibid., p. 4.

⁸³ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 61.

⁸⁴ Williams, p. 32.

detect within *Watt*, along the lines of Williams' suggestion that 'there is always already a "supplement" within any given text, a point where play can begin.'⁸⁵ the novel is in fact so open and self-aware in the processes of structural insufficiencies that it exhibits itself as such. If 'the term "play" is used by Derrida to show how structures have a looseness and openness at their very heart'⁸⁶ then we can see Beckett employing this technique in an embryonic form, in everything from the pastiche of logical positivism, right through to the suggestion of endless spheres of possible meaning in the structuring of the book.

Despite this, *Watt* does not reach the potential its strongest aspects strive for. It is in many respects limited by its reliance on accepted forms of writing and has yet to find the originality and synergy of form and content we shall see in the forthcoming chapters. It is not a poststructuralist work, although it does contain aspects which can most appropriately fall under the banner. Specifically in its dissatisfaction with language we must acknowledge that to an extent *Watt*, if not Beckett is Mauthnerian. Again, these modes will be picked up and vastly enlarged in the works to come. As will the symbioses of form and content we have explored, with the former coming to dominate more and more as the works progress. We shall see in the following chapter the physical expression of philosophical concern taken to its zenith and a shedding of any sustained specific attacks on a particular theology or philosophy as can arguably be found in *Watt*. It is also at this point one gets a sense Beckett has gone as far as he currently can with the novel form as he knows it. Overly familiar and ill-fitting for his goals it is in the next works we shall look at, the 1946 novellas, that Beckett has dispensed with the novel as written in his native tongue and employs the French language for its lack of associations and ability to harness the minimal style he seeks. If *Watt* is the moment of realisation and its terrifying

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 35.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

consequences, with furtive explorations of possible solutions, it is in the forthcoming works we shall find these solutions fully explored and pulled apart.

Chapter Three:

Reassessing the 1946 Novellas

Having finished the protracted composition of *Watt* whilst spending a brief period of time in Ireland, Samuel Beckett returned to France in 1946 and proceeded to write the novel *Mercier and Camier*, as well as four novellas. Within Beckett criticism it has so often been the case that *The Trilogy* is cited as the point at which several major shifts occur in the author's fiction. These shifts are usually identified as, primarily: French as the new language of composition; the creation of a partially stream-of-consciousness, first-person mode of speech identifiable as uniquely Beckettian; and the replacement in form and content of overt erudition and wit with a stripped, functional and descriptive approach. Since Deirdre Bair mistakenly conflated Krapp⁸⁷ and Beckett's visions it has been all too convenient to imagine the latter as the tortured artist, battered by the elements at the end of the pier, inspired by the revelation there to immediately pen *Molloy*. Even in his correcting of the vision myth James Knowlson finds little to say about four works written in 1946, yet containing prototypical and even finished versions of the new approaches just outlined. During this immediate post-war 'frenzy of writing'⁸⁸, as Beckett put it, he completed the story *The End*⁸⁹ (middle of February to May), the novel *Mercier and Camier* (July to October) as well as three further short works entitled *The Expelled* (October), *First Love* (October to December) and *The Calmative* (December). As we have thus far focused exclusively on Beckett's novels the turning to these novellas requires a degree of explanation. Whilst focussing on *Mercier and Camier* may seem the logical choice, it is in fact a much more useful work to examine in the light of the drama that will popularise

87 As in the only character to appear within, what is generally accepted to be Beckett's most autobiographical play, *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, III (New York: Grove Press, 2006) Deirdre Bair's biography *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (1978) has been factually corrected in many aspects since its publication, with this example one amongst many that James Knowlson rectifies in *Damned to Fame* (1996)

88 James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 358.

89 Although began in English as *Suite*.

Beckett and also come from this middle period of his output. We can see in the third-person depiction of the relationship between two tramp-like figures and their often loving, often abusive relationship Badiou's notion of the typically Beckettian 'TWO'⁹⁰. This is the two of Vladimir and Estragon, of Winnie and Willie, of Ham and Clov. If this novel contains the seeds of the plays to come then it could equally be said that the novellas, written the same year, offer us real insight into the intention and mechanics of the post-war novels. Furthermore, this chapter will make the case that an error has been made in the neglect of these works and their relative marginalisation⁹¹ in our understanding of Beckett's canon. The novellas are both essential to understanding the four novels that follow them, but also important works independently, presenting us with a mixture of lasting Beckettian motifs and original form and content not to be seen in the same guise throughout the rest of the oeuvre.⁹²

Death: A Reflection of Life

Thematically these works are far more cohesive than anything Beckett had yet produced. They begin to demand the type of reading which rewards attention to the sprawling and idiosyncratic narrative and allows the interconnectivity of the themes to rise to the surface. Presiding over all others at this time, and indeed one could argue in Beckett's subsequent prose, is the spectre of death. In previous work death has of course played a part, most

90 In the next chapter this is discussed in greater detail regarding some of the relationships within *Molloy*, but for now it is worth looking to the following quotation which neatly summarizes the duality of the relationships we shall see so fully explored within Beckett's drama: 'The two of love is a hazardous and chance-laden mediation for alterity in general. It elicits a rupture or severance of the cogito's One; by virtue of this very fact, however, it can hardly stand on its own, opening instead onto the limitless multiple of Being.' Alain Badiou, *On Beckett* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), p. 28.

91 This is not to ignore works such as Julia Kristeva's essay 'The Father, Love and Banishment' in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1980). Here she employs psychoanalytical and poststructuralist techniques to reassess assumptions we may make of the meanings to be taken from *First Love*.

92 Amongst the few that have argued for a greater degree of reverence to be paid to these novellas P.J. Murphy may be one of the most fervent, arguing that '*The Calmative* deserves recognition as a central work in the Beckett canon because[...] it is the cradle of future fictions.' P.J. Murphy, *Reconstructing Beckett* (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 23.

spectacularly in cutting short the life of Murphy, overly fond of his ill-advised, home-made gas heating solution. Beginning with the forebodingly titled *The End* however, we have a series of works that are meditations on the afterlife from the perspective of characters implied dead and speaking from beyond the grave. The degree to which these new kind of protagonists can be defined as separate entities at all is something we shall look at momentarily but so similar are they that statements can comfortably be made about one that will often apply to them all. This is the emergence of the Beckettian hero, something we have traced the evolution of in the previous two chapters. Moving away from the young men of *Murphy*, *Watt* and going back even further *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *More Pricks Than Kicks* we are now placed inside the crumbling minds of geriatric men occupying a place on the outer fringes of society. These new creatures are the roots of a loosely homogeneous group of central characters that we can start to define and recognise by virtue of their detached, sometimes sociopathic mindset and their dishevelled physical appearance with numerously pocketed greatcoat and rimmed hat a regular feature. This, however, is merely one example amongst many of the strides these four 1946 novellas make towards the realisation of a more complete form of prose writing we see in the later works. I also intend to examine other striking aspects, including the shift to a first-person mode of narration, the journey of the exiled hero, time as a subjective concept, life as a kind of hell-space or purgatory, the importance of the base and physical in metaphysical illustration, and finally the idea of love as a potential solution to the chasm of death. This is not to detract from the overall aim of the thesis, which remains the examination of the novels' engagement with philosophy and emergence as philosophies themselves. The radical shifts these works hold will be shown as essential to this evolution and brought out by the idea of death as it umbrellas the other themes already outlined.

In *Autopsia: Self, Death, and God after Kierkegaard and Derrida* (2008) Marius Timmann Mjaaland summarises Søren Kierkegaard's position in his work *At A Graveside* (1845) writing that 'It is rather death that breaks up the unambiguous understanding of being, and continuously breaks up the images and notions used to describe it.'⁹³ This is the perspective he takes throughout the work, arguing that rather than being a possible point of explanation, death is in fact an area of destabilisation, existing as an unknown which in our trying to understand it merely reflects our own anxieties and partiality back at us. What follows life is 'indefinable – the only certainty, and the only thing about which nothing is certain.'⁹⁴ and so he asserts that 'Death is not given any definitive meaning. Where death is concerned, one's own death, there is no direct connection between the signifier and the signified.'⁹⁵ This is as strong a way to make his point as possible. Kierkegaard argues that death is so unknowable that its actual existence and the language we use to describe it bear no relation to each other. In making this assertion Kierkegaard is not only describing his own position, but in fact speaking of a whole history of philosophy and theology that would try to reduce death by describing it in a language of abstractions. Indeed, we can see in ideas such as this the type of revolutionary personality that would come to attack the church for deluding the masses. Looking at the first of the Mjaaland quotations cited we can see that Kierkegaard argues it would be more honest to admit what we know of death to be what we know of ourselves. As Kierkegaard himself puts it 'this inexplicableness certainly needs an explanation. But the earnestness lies in just this, that the explanation does not explain death but discloses the state of the explainer's own innermost being.'⁹⁶ This attempt to reposit our understanding inwards, to align death with the subjective and personal as a way to reach a more honest understanding of our limits is exactly what

93 Marius Timmann Mjaaland, *Autopsia: Self, Death, and God after Kierkegaard and Derrida* (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), p. 100.

94 Søren Kierkegaard, *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 91.

95 Mjaaland, p. 95.

96 Kierkegaard, p. 97.

Beckett explores within the novellas. Eric Levy suggests that 'we can only marvel at Samuel Beckett who, through his beleaguered narrator, pushes even closer to expressing the coincidence of two impossible contraries: Being and Nothing.'⁹⁷ Levy describes Beckett's method very well; his characters are not mouthpieces for didactic repetition on the fallacy of understanding death. Rather, through bearing witness to their journeys, the way they conduct themselves and the thoughts that do and do not motivate them to action the tension between death and the myriad ways it is reflected in everyday living is vividly illustrated.

It could be argued that speaking of these characters in this manner is to overly homogenise them and that such inclusive and sweeping statements ignore the clear differences between the four. However, it seems that in order to truly understand the effect of these novellas, not only in terms of their collective meaning, but also insofar as they relate to the evolution of Beckett's work in general, we must view them as forming part of a whole. It is again Levy who puts this well, commenting on these four novellas and two later examples he notes that they 'are better considered as an indefinite series than as wholly independent narrations.'⁹⁸ Indeed, one could take this even further and argue that within the prose it is possible to conceive of Beckett as a career-long re-drafter. He essentially writes the same character repeatedly, although realised differently within each work; subsequent examples an attempt to better reflect and illustrate his ideas. This evolution is something we have seen in the preceding chapters, both in terms of the move towards the archetypal hero of Beckett's prose and the functionality of the character as illustrative example. However, it is here, in these four novellas, that we shall see great strides made toward a more complete definition of the character in every respect. By the time Beckett begins *Molloy* he already

⁹⁷ Eric P. Levy, *Beckett and the Voice of Species: A Study of The Prose Fiction* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1980), p. 117.

⁹⁸ Levy, p. 106.

has his template and alters it by various degrees to fit his purpose. Selecting specific examples can therefore be difficult, as once this point has been made the degree to which an incident or character trait can be read as uniformly intratextual varies a good deal. Yet, despite this caveat, it is the intention of this chapter to examine the theme of death as it is collectively expressed through the works, so if for each specific example a complimentary instance cannot be found within another story, it is usually a by-product of Beckett's methodology. As I have said, ideas emerge and bubble to the surface through a process of dense suggestion and implication whilst quotable incidents are often nomadic and supported by a great degree of less identifiable material.

However, it would be a mistake to think of these as subtle or elusive works with regards to expressing their central theme. Before moving onto concerns that feed into death and its philosophical ramifications it is worth emphasising the directness Beckett offers in the novellas. This includes relatively benign examples as in *The End* where the narrator requests a crocus bulb from his landlord so as he can nurture it on his windowsill. When he tries to water it with his own urine its life is expectedly cut short. He is asked if he would like another bulb to try growing the plant once more, but declines the offer without a thought, giving the impression he was only attempting to grow the plant out of a half-forgotten habit, removed from his almost somnambulist existence. This kind of episode is typical of the way Beckett includes death as incidental and yet invested in the main plot of the story. It is never allowed to slip from focus and even in the moments the characters are not directly concerned with their impending end there are reminders everywhere that living is also waiting for death.

Initially *First Love* may seem to stand separate from the other three novellas. It has a

young man as a protagonist, still at odds with the world, but functioning within society to a much greater extent than the bedraggled old men we find in the other works. Despite this, it also shares many of the same concerns, and shows us they are conditions of life, sharpened and inescapable in old age, but not caused by it. It is debatable whether the narrators of *The End*, *The Calmative* and *The Expelled* are even still living when they recount the experiences of the stories. In *The Calmative* the narrator bluntly offers the opinion 'It is not my wish to labour these antinomies, for we are needless to say in a skull.' (TC, p. 269.) If we have the incidental and the plain inclusion of death in these two types of examples, then it is in *The Expelled* we find one of the rarer types of content from the novellas. The ending of the story is both unusually poetic and abstract, with the narrator concluding

When I am abroad in the morning I go to meet the sun, and in the evening, when I am abroad, I follow it, till I am down among the dead. I don't know why I told this story, I could just as well have told another. Perhaps some other time I'll be able to tell another. Living souls, you will see how alike they all are. (TEX, p. 259.)

Passages like these lead one to believe, like *Malone Dies*, that there is a strong suggestion the distended sense of time, the freakishly inhabited world, and the endlessly wandering characters are actually just symptomatic of the character being, if not dead, then not fully alive: in final moments of existence recalling scattered incidents of a life.

What is the implication of this shift for Beckett's work? In *Murphy* and *Watt* the characters were outcasts from society, skirting the margins in search of a greater depth of knowledge than the world was capable of offering them, but still living and breathing, blessed with a degree of agency. In these novellas it is suggested the characters are speaking from a point past the end of life. There is a suggestion in the quote from *The Calmative* that we are 'in a skull' as it were and that we have moved beyond one of the biggest metaphysical debates over the centuries, that of mind-body separation. In keeping with Beckett's attention to,

and lack of faith in, philosophical speculation displayed in his previous work it could be argued that this is an extension of the new path he takes following his vision. As Kierkegaard suggests, all we really gain from speculation on death is a greater knowledge of ourselves as the idea we could understand the afterlife is merely a reflection of the way we assign meaning to existence. In these new works Beckett suggests a state of unease and scepticism over never truly knowing the extent of mind-body connectivity and equates it with death. The implication, as we shall explore in greater depth later, is that life is already a kind of death, at least in the terms we could understand it. The separation of speculation and knowledge is so great as to render meaning in permanent flux; the sum-total of a maelstrom of not knowing, which mirrors the meaning we designate death.

The Body in Decay

Returning to the passage that concludes *The Expelled* we can also see very clearly the type of internalisation possible with Beckett making the shift from the third to first-person mode of narration. This is a very different voice to the narrator of Beckett's earlier novels and yet not so distinct that we cannot identify in its genesis a process of evolution. Generally, in terms of form, the changes that occur from *Dream* to *Watt* are indeed great and in previous chapters we have looked at the discarding of the flourishes in language and witticisms that characterise Beckett's formative writing style. It is really in *Watt* we see the author turn his focus away from central characters similar in age, temperament and experience to himself and toward men on the fringes of society, new homeless and deformed creatures, filled with bewilderment and a painful awareness of humankind's fated ignorance of complete knowledge. Yet, it is with the novellas, which are the first truly reflective work accomplished by Beckett after his experiences in The Second World War⁹⁹,

⁹⁹ *Watt* was written during World War II and the extent which it can be deemed a “war novel” is highly debatable due to its content and Beckett's insistence that it was merely an exercise to keep his mind active whilst he was in hiding. The novellas examined in this chapter also bear no immediate tangible link to the

that the process of evolution is drastically accelerated. As mentioned earlier, Beckett was the recipient of a life-changing, but seemingly non-religious vision, which both galvanised the steps he had taken in recent work and furthermore offered new insights he would employ throughout the rest of his career. It is probably as a result of Deirdre Bair's misunderstanding of the level of autobiographical content within *Krapp's Last Tape* that Beckett was unusually candid in offering James Knowlson an explanation, saying 'Krapp's vision was on the pier at Dún Laoghaire; mine was in my mother's room. Make that clear once and for all.'¹⁰⁰ This clarification aside Krapp's vision is certainly a rendering of Beckett's own and gives us an insight into the magnitude of the discovery for this character and his creator. In the play Krapp is, for the majority, hunched over his tape recorder, listening to recordings he made as a younger man. There is one particular fragment of audio that angers Krapp however, or seems to stir up emotions in him too strong to bear. He fast-forwards through this retelling of his visionary revelation with the audience only hearing the words '...clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most...'¹⁰¹ It was subsequently revealed to Knowlson that the missing words were 'in reality my most precious ally.'¹⁰² In the far more domestic setting of Beckett's vision he

realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.¹⁰³

This extract is the most quoted and probably succinct part of Beckett's retelling of his revelation. In words to friends and at other points, however, Beckett intimated that the

war, but they are the first works he completed following its end. Considering the illustrative manner in which I am arguing Beckett approached more abstract issues, it is also worth considering how this relates to his dealing with history and his part in it.

100 Knowlson, p. 352. Beckett's was an artistic revelation; a 'recognition of his own stupidity, (*Molloy* and the others came to me the day I became aware of my own folly. Only then did I begin to write the things I feel.)' Knowlson, p. 352.

101 *Krapp's Last Tape*, p. 226.

102 Knowlson, p. 352.

103 Ibid.

vision was wider in scope, including more specific details of how 'In future, his work would focus on poverty, failure, exile and loss; as he put it as a 'non-knower' and as a 'non-can-er' [i.e. someone who cannot].'¹⁰⁴ In the novellas we will see this manifested in both form and content. The former we shall examine later, but it is worth looking at the more overt changes in content we find in these works. Following on from what has already been said regarding Beckett's new focus on issues that could be broadly placed under the banner of "negation" Knowlson asserts that this change is in large part a result of the effect of Beckett's wartime experiences:

Metaphysical *Angst*, he had learned, could be profoundly disquieting or depressing. But it was seldom life-threatening[...] Many of the features of his later prose and plays arise directly from his experiences of radical uncertainty, disorientation, exile, hunger and need.¹⁰⁵

To an extent we can see how this awareness was already present in Beckett's work, in the propensity to turn to the physical as the most potent way to express unknowability that we have examined in the previous chapter on *Watt*. The intention of this chapter is not to debate the degree of influence Beckett's experiences during The Second World War had on his work, but what is clear enough is the definitive shift after its conclusion to an entirely new type of content. Again, it is Knowlson who suggests this:

More revealing still of the changes that occurred in Beckett's writing since the war is the way in which, instead of displaying his erudition as overtly as much of his pre-war prose and poetry used to do, Beckett draws on it in passing, as a relic of a former wide-ranging education, or uses it in a comic parody of learning or as an invocation of ignorance, confusion and bewilderment.¹⁰⁶

The latter states described in both of these Knowlson extracts are the ground the novellas try and tread. In a work like *Murphy* there are many episodes that would have seemed somewhat lowbrow for Beckett's contemporary audience; prostitution, promiscuity and the blackly comic death of the eponymous hero for example. The novellas on the other hand

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 353.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 351.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 374.

exist entirely outwith the usual boundaries of taste and decency, with a great deal of content describing functions and afflictions of the body in a purposefully crass and discomfoting manner. This is a template we will see employed in *Molloy* only a few years later, although by that time the content will be incorporated more fully into the fabric of the text. In its initial use in these short works the examples we find are purposefully conspicuous by virtue of their frequency, length and depravity. If we take just a few from *The End* the effect is clear. To begin with the narrator speaks of his genitals, rectum and skull which, like the narrators of all the novellas are a point of intense interest and more often than not personal discomfort. In *The End* it is made explicit that the narrator's skull is damaged or in the grip of some disfiguring ailment. He says 'I treated my crablice with salt water and seaweed, but a lot of nits must have survived. I put a compress of seaweed on my skull, which gave me great relief, but not for long.' (TE, p. 284.) This type of description is typical, as is the frankly stomach-churning episode in which the narrator becomes physically disabled during his stay at a cabin in the wilderness. The setting is described thus:

The vilest acts had been committed on the ground and against the walls. The floor was strewn with excrements, both human and animal, with condoms and vomit[...] In a cowpad a heart had been traced, pierced by an arrow. And yet there was nothing to attract tourists. (TE, p. 285.)

This is the type of blackly comic scene that Beckett critics tend to avoid, presumably for the reason it does not appear to relate directly to the supposedly loftier themes of the works. The character's escape is the most grisly part with a cow having wandered into the cabin:

I tried to suck her, without much success. Her udder was covered with dung. I took off my hat and, summing all my energy, began to milk her into it. The milk fell to the ground and was lost, but I said to myself, No matter, it's free. She dragged me across the floor, stopping from time to time only to kick me. (TE, p. 285.)

This episode is a necessary part of the progress the character must make in returning to the

city and the level of crass detailing is a choice we shall discuss briefly. However, the most bizarre of these base descriptions are those that do not even bear an ostensible relation to exposition or plot development. There is a category which could be better defined as a mutated form of internal reflection. Rather than an interior monologue on the external events occurring within the story, or even some more abstract concern, what we receive is a series of meticulous descriptions of the most sordid physical acts the narrator engages in. Shane Weller notes the progress the protagonists of the novellas have made from the levels of mental abstraction earlier characters seemed capable of. Whether or not that was illusory, these characters seem at times exclusively capable of concern for their failing bodies. He writes that

Not only are the vagabond narrators of the *Novellas* estranged from the world into which they find themselves expelled, but any withdrawal from the 'outer reality' of the kind achieved in *Dream* and *Murphy* has become all but impossible.¹⁰⁷

Again, it is the narrator of *The End* who tells us

I unbuttoned my trousers discreetly to scratch myself. I scratched myself in an upward direction, with four nails. I pulled on the hairs, to get relief[...] It was in the arse I had the most pleasure, I stuck in my forefinger up to the knuckle. Later, if I had to shit, the pain was atrocious. But I hardly ever shat any more. (TE, p. 288.)

This episode in particular reminds one of Murphy's arranging of biscuits in Hyde park, with the application of a method akin to logical positivism applied to the seemingly banal variations with which one can eat a selection of biscuits. In *The End* he is not working through a methodology in the same manner, but is reflecting upon the relative virtues of scratching different parts of his body with a seriousness befitting a topic of philosophical concern. Daniela Caselli argues persuasively that the importance of these passages lies in their function as critique of the value attributed to certain kinds of literature and its canonical importance. She notes in the following quotation, which focuses on the aligning of these scatological passages with a writer like Dante in the original French version of

¹⁰⁷ Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), p. 96.

The End:

But what appears to be a mere dismissal of authorities by mockingly raising the scatological matter to the heights of great literature [by placing bodily references amongst canonical reference], highlights how ephemeral and variable is the 'value' of words, while also placing the text within the canon. The alleged lack of value of the text is foregrounded in order to reclaim its own status of literature while commenting on the processes of attributing value to literature.¹⁰⁸

I agree with Caselli but would go further. I would contend that Beckett frequently employs these graphic and disturbing descriptions as not only a critique of the worth and place certain kinds of writing occupies, but as a critique of the approach these writings take towards the issues which are their concern. Although this thesis is concerned with the place of philosophy in Beckett's work, this is in some respects simply an effective lens with which to view the various ideas fundamental to these works and which have most often been taken up by philosophical writers. Of course a writer like Dante is far more a theologian than a philosopher, although the content of his work has undeniable philosophical import. What the novellas do is to dislocate these questions of life and death and of the meaning in both from the rhetorical, literary and theological contexts from within which they are so commonly dealt with. By realigning these issues with the cruel, the bodily, the sexual and the scatological Beckett asks us to re-examine how we have been addressing these issues and if we should not be employing other means. This is indeed the purpose of these base passages. They are of course not an end in themselves but best thought of as contributing to the tapestry of meaning Beckett constructs within his work by this point. If we are to recall his revelation, that he must not try and emulate Joyce's totality of content and meaning, then the intent becomes clear. These works, like those that have come before, are concerned with the most fundamental questions of existence: the limits of language, the existence of God and unknowability. By the time we reach *Watt* we

108 Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 122. The content within the square brackets in this quotation are from Caselli herself.

have a writer fully aware of the precarious nature of engaging with a metaphysical tradition and trying to stake one's own place within this area. Indeed the novel is a tragedy of the realisation such abstracted and lofty thinking is in fact illusory.

A major shift with the novellas is the evolution of the illustrative method we have already examined in the previous two chapters on *Murphy* and *Watt*. This is a technique that offers a series of pictures contributing to an overall impression upon the reader. If we look to *The Expelled* we find the narrator under very similar physical duress to that of *The End*. This is a point we need not labour, but much like the duality of identity we are to find with Molloy and Moran, the narrators of the novellas are implied one and the same. For example the following excerpt is strikingly similar in content to that which we have already seen in *The End*:

I had then the deplorable habit, having pissed my trousers, or shat there, which I did fairly regularly early in the morning, about ten or half past ten, of persisting in going on and finishing my day as if nothing had happened. The very idea of changing my trousers, or of confiding in mother, who goodness knows asked nothing better than to help me, was unbearable, I don't know why, and till bedtime I dragged on with burning and stinking between my little thighs or sticking to my bottom, the result of incontinence. (TEX, p. 251.)

We can see in this recollection from childhood the first attempts at the rambling, fervent style which will become so recognisable as Molloy's manner of speaking. The dizzying proliferation of clauses creating very long run-on sentences is an essential part of Beckett's illustrative method. It is a process of subversion by which something so seemingly inconsequential and base is discussed in detail, through a style that conveys desperation to relinquish the information the narrator holds. This desperation is a kind of plugging the gap, a futile attempt to fill the chasm of unknowability with language; a mode these characters are all too aware is wholly insufficient. Further to this, we also find that the narrator shares problems with his skull. After being invited to stay the night in the

coachman's barn, the host and his wife are taken aback when they catch sight of the narrator's exposed head. The narrator notes that 'He drew his wife's attention to the postule on top of my skull, for I had removed my hat out of civility. He should have that removed, she said.' (TEX, pp. 257-258.) Again, we can infer a number of different meanings from this particular physical complaint. Firstly we could say that it is just one of the many signs these characters' bodies are in decay, with the consequent thematic links to Beckett's new focus on negation, lack of knowledge and so forth. We could also identify the symbolism of the skull being broken alongside the aforementioned references paid to the mind-body problem. We could think of these broken heads as metaphors for the fragility of the mind. If Beckett's work suggests an impossible resolution to the question of the relationship between the internal and external then these could be warnings of the delicate state we share if our mind is all we can rely upon. Lastly we could see these as indicators of the world the narrators' consciousness occupies. These narratives describe a distorted dream-like city in which the psyche of the protagonists seems to spill over into the physical world and one could focus upon these damaged skulls as symbols of a physical violence or trauma, one that has produced a state of coma or, as is heavily implied, death.

This pattern is continued in *The Calmative*, a story that progresses in the same vein as the two Beckett had already penned in '46. We are again given the impression of a body in decay, shutting down in old age and infirmity, becoming more and more victim to its physical limitations. In a description of simply turning about we find echoes of Watt's extraordinary walk and prescience of Molloy on his bicycle. The narrator tells us 'When I say turned about I mean I wheeled round in a wide semi-circle without slowing down, for I was afraid if I stopped of not being able to start again...' (TC, pp. 268-269.) Through his prose Beckett creates a palimpsestic effect, with the refinement of content and form in each work

adding to an overall impression that urges us to see, through the current incarnation of a character for example, the many predecessors that have shaped his design. With the publication of each work we find a growing number of these tropes, but the novellas are notable for the wealth of examples they create or solidify in our idea of the Beckettian hero. In another example from *The Calmative* the narrator tells us 'I was wearing my long green greatcoat with the velvet collar, such as motorists wore about 1900, my father's, but that day it was sleeveless, a vast cloak.' (TC, p. 264.) The greatcoat is one of the key visual signifiers that makes up the uniform for Beckett's tramp-like men. In this particular example the coat has no sleeves and again a degree of symbolism can be inferred. The absence of arms on the coat would certainly be an apposite metaphor for the absence of action and agency which these characters suffer from. The physical is dominant in these works because of its tangibility and opposition to the abstracted affirming knowledge Beckett is writing against. However, we can see in this example that it is cradled as the lesser of two evils; a simpler, more immediate form of knowledge and yet in the end harbouring just as much uncertainty as the mind and even further from possible answers to the questions of meaning and existence. In the previous chapter on *Watt* we discussed differing explanations for Beckett's focus on the physical as a way of expressing philosophical concerns. We can see here a continuation in particular of the idea the protagonists and the worlds they occupy are physical expressions of problems in affirmative metaphysical speculation. As I have already said there is the sustained focus in the novellas on problems the narrators have with their skulls, which suggest a kind of metonymical relationship in which this stands for problems of the mind we can see these characters develop from *Watt* onwards. In both *Watt* and the novellas we have these wandering protagonists, searching for solutions to their confusion in understanding and interpreting the world, but finding none. In the novellas there is an ever greater aligning of

the internal state of the protagonists with the world in general, largely achieved by the switch to a first-person mode of narration in which both the inner and outer worlds are presented to us through the lens of these consciousnesses. As Weller suggests, these narrators are both exiled from their own societies and from the world of internal reflection Murphy and Watt seek refuge in.¹⁰⁹ There are very few abstract reflections from the narrators of these novellas. Beckett has begun to implement the reduction and negation he saw as essential to his work at this time. It is as if all concerns have been brought down to a series of crude reflections on the world and one's place in it as any wider meaning to existence is impossible to ascertain.

One may query how far we may therefore associate *First Love* with the rest of these stories in this area, considering it has a younger narrator, not yet riddled with bodily decrepitude and base fascination. It seems clear however that the physical is just as important in this story, although it is dealt with in a slightly different manner. This protagonist may be in better health and not possessed of the vile habits of the other characters, but he is already well aware and indeed disgusted by the functions of the body. This story displays the Beckett hero at a stage of development where he still holds himself apart from the tide of physicality and is in fact disgusted by the living and breathing of people. In fact he expresses a fondness for dead flesh over that of his fellow citizens, noting that the smell of corpses is 'a trifle heady, but how infinitely preferable to what the living emit, their feet, teeth, armpits, arses, sticky foreskins and frustrated ovules.' (FL, pp. 229-230.) Again, the disgust he feels is sexualised, as in the other examples we have seen. One gets the sense later in the story that he is engaging in a relationship with a woman, not out of true desire, but out of an irresistible compulsion of the body. Furthermore, he shares a cruelty both with Watt¹¹⁰ and with his fellow narrators of the novellas, such as *The Expelled* in which the

109 Weller, p. 96.

110 Who we discussed in the previous chapter taking pleasure in the abuse of animals.

character expresses his sincere wish to harm a child. The irony of the title *First Love* need not be drawn out, it is flaunted in the following quotation in which the narrator describes one of the early encounters in their “courtship”: ‘She began stroking my ankles. I considered kicking her in the cunt.’ (FL, p. 234.) There is a shared purpose and intent in these vivid and often disturbing descriptions. It is the casual way the narrative slips into unexpectedly lurid detail, often at great length and frequency, illustrating their importance as more than simply an aspect of the milieu of the world Beckett creates. Having already moved towards a more illustrative approach in his last novel, alongside a systematic eradication of the stylised language, generic parody and Joycean derivation of his early work, these physical descriptions bear a greater weight than may initially seem the case. The novellas look out on the world from a pinhole perspective of subjectivity. We are given consciousnesses which consistently question their truth and validity and seek a greater degree of stability through a barrage of vulgar and base descriptions. In the absence of truth within metaphysical speculation it is only our defecating, decaying bodies and the world they occupy that can offer a reprieve and even then a reprieve only by virtue of its immediate and apparent force. Kierkegaard writes ‘Finally, it must be said of death’s decision that it is *inexplicable*. That is, whether or not people find an explanation, death itself explains nothing.’¹¹¹ If these novellas represent the start of a more sustained focus on death, or how death, as Kierkegaard argues, is really only our own thinking on the meaning of life, then what this extended focus on the body illustrates is the utter falsehood of hoping to achieve truth through abstracted speculation.

Beckett said that his revelation was about finding his own method in opposition to Joyce’s totality of understanding. We can see in this new content one of Beckett’s first attempts at finding areas of negation and “not-knowing” as he would put it. From conclusions like this

¹¹¹ Kierkegaard, p. 96.

one can see why Beckett is so often labelled a nihilist and one who finds more in the absence of meaning than actually contributing to its fulfilment. In many respects this is the same type of criticism aimed at practitioners of deconstruction; a movement that's proximity to Beckett's work has been mentioned in previous chapters and shall be discussed in later chapters. I would also offer a rebuttal drawn from deconstruction and argue that rather than assuming the endpoint of this kind of thinking is an endlessly self-negating process leading to an arrested, inactive position, what we actually have is an attempt to strip away centuries of metaphysical speculation. This is an attempt to look inward at the most fundamental tools of reason and understanding, examine their flaws, and in a very positive way seek improvements or alternative methods of progression.

The Legacy of Dante

If we are to look at the history of death within the major movements of Western philosophy it has been, broadly speaking, an attempt to employ the tools of reason, metaphysical and theological speculation to divine the truth of what happens when life ceases. Through allusions in Beckett's early work, his education, the content of his letters and biography it is clear he was steeped in these types of knowledge from a young age and further that he aimed to continue in a tradition of fiction that examined and participated in the most fundamental questions of religion and being. The most significant writer for Beckett in terms of theological influence was Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy* is a trilogy that appears throughout the prose in both subtle and overt references. This has perhaps been elucidated most clearly in the Daniela Caselli's aforementioned *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism*. She asserts that

Various intertextually connoted terms, different textual places from the *Comedy*, most of which are by now textual commonplaces in the Beckett canon, and a number of quotations, make Dante part of the flickering, unavoidable, non-coinciding memory of

the voice who says 'I'.¹¹²

Her contention, that Dante is an essential and formative part of the Beckettian archetype evolving towards the subjective consciousness we see most clearly in the post-war prose, is certainly a compelling one.¹¹³ It strikes me that in the relationship between death and physicality displayed in the novellas we find echoes of the descriptions contained within Dante's *Inferno* and a specific manifestation of the intertextuality Caselli highlights.

In this first volume of the comedy Dante describes his descent into hell, led by the guide Virgil. The epic poem is essentially an extended description of the underworld; its interior imagined in a very literal way, encompassing multiple levels and forms of punishment matching the severity of the sinner. In his bid to escape the underworld Dante is forced to travel deeper and deeper, through increasingly brutal holdings as he makes his way toward Satan himself, and the exit. It is not the volume of sins committed that dictates the separation of each level, but rather the gravity of the sin according to Catholicism or at least Dante's take on Catholic dogma. In most editions one will find a plan of hell, and having the layout so clearly presented may be surprised at the ordering of sins, with groups such as the 'intellectually dishonest' occupying a much lower level than those who have committed 'violence against others.'¹¹⁴ It seems that this example in particular arises from Dante in his capacity as a poet, and not as a theologian. That said, the work generally attempts at an objective, didactic purpose, in a manner John Milton will adapt several hundred years later. Dante tries to render as accurately as he can the intricacies of hell and the many levels as a macrocosm of society, with the concept of sin as the hierarchical principle.

¹¹² Caselli, p. 120.

¹¹³ As well as the more oblique references Caselli cites from within the novellas, she also looks at more direct textual traces such as a passage in the French version of *The End* which explicitly mentions Dante, but then is excised in Beckett's English translation. Caselli, pp. 121-122.

¹¹⁴ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy I: Inferno* (London: Penguin, 2006), Plan of Hell

The physical punishment of the lost souls is played out over and over in Dante's descriptions of seared flesh and endless servitude as one would expect from a tradition of epic religious poetry that equates physical debasement with didactic intent.¹¹⁵ One example among many comes from canto eighteen of *Inferno*. In this part of the journey Dante and Virgil have reached the fringes of Rottenpockets, a ridged structure built into a cliff with a well at its bottom. As per Dante's vision of hell these ten levels hold even more diabolical forms of punishment than that which they have already witnessed. This area is a home for those who have committed 'Sins of deceit against those who have no cause to trust.' with the first level, or pocket, having a population of 'pimps and seducers'.¹¹⁶ Recognising someone he knows (in spite of the man's beaten and charred appearance) Dante questions the man on his sins and learns that in life he had arranged the sexual relationship of his sister and a marquis for personal gain.¹¹⁷ The punishment for transgressions of this kind is described in the following example:

Then, to my right, I saw fresh suffering:
new whips, new torments and new torturers,
and Pocket One, with these, was all a-flutter.
Down in those depths, stark naked, there were sinners...
there were (I saw them!) horny demons lashing,
lashing the rear with their vicious scourges.¹¹⁸

We find in an example like this a possible source for the type of physical punishment and debasement the characters of the novellas undergo almost continuously, exiled and journeying toward more of the same. Dante's vision is not a portrayal of the afterlife Beckett adopts literally within his own work¹¹⁹, but instead reflects within the lives of his

115 Again one could look to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) or even Sir Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596) for further examples of this. In Spenser's poem it is the righteous and often brutal slayings of dragons and demons that represent quashing of Catholic forces in opposition to Queen Elizabeth I's Protestant reign.

116 Alighieri, *Plan of Hell*

117 Ibid., p. 155.

118 Ibid., pp. 153-155.

119 By this point in his work Beckett's references are usually embedded in the fabric of the work. We find one clear nod to Dante within the novellas in the form of the following quotation, which echoes the

characters, suggesting a conception of death that looks toward current experience and the limitations of our own existence. The punishment the body undergoes in the novellas is a product, not of divine retribution, but of decay, decrepitude and human cruelty. In the end this intense focus on the body mirrors Dante's vision of hell, re-positing it as merely the state of living we share, devoid of moralistic notions of justice and coming to us all regardless of circumstance. Caselli notes of the place Beckett finds for Dante in the novellas that 'The journey of the *Comedy* cannot function as a source, but is rather a literary space towards which the text intermittently gestures, while refusing to be assimilated.'¹²⁰ Not only is this gesturing an excellent way of describing Beckett's novels' interactions with their influences and inspirations¹²¹ more generally, but helps us understand how Beckett could reconfigure an influence like the *Comedy* to reflect his own world-view. As we have noted, Beckett's new-found direction is away from abstraction, affirmation and knowledge and towards the base and tangible, the not-knowing and not-doing. This reductive method of stripping away the layers of meaning ascribed to abstracted processes is primarily a surrendering of false notions such as the idea we can ever know more than the hellish nature of living. Dante's *Comedy* is invoked but its tripartite nature is snubbed in the world of the novellas. These characters suffer in a continual process that suggests whether living or dead this is as much as they can expect, that the possibility of salvation, of paradise, is never on offer.

Even though it is *The Inferno* which seems the most likely inspiration for the physical descriptions of the novellas, the actual state of life Beckett conceives often has more in

description of the entrance to hell from the start of *The Inferno*: '... it was nothing, mere speechlessness due to long silence, as in the wood that darkens the mouth of hell, do you remember, I only just.' TC, p. 265.

120 Caselli, p. 126.

121 Indeed, Caselli is trying to categorise the process outwith a simple process of influencer and influenced that we attempted to get at in chapter one of this thesis. The relationship she describes the novellas and the three novels having with the *Comedy* has similarities to the process of bricolage I sought to characterise within *Murphy*.

common with *Purgatory*. In this second volume of *The Divine Comedy* Dante leaves Hell and arrives at the foot of Mount Purgatory. Ascending to the summit over three days and nights he encounters many who are serving a penal sentence, imposed as a punishment before they are allowed to enter Heaven. Of course Beckett's vision of purgatory occurs before death, with these series of narrators replaying various moments in their life amongst some of the more hellish imagery previously described. The most telling aspect in terms of our understanding of Beckett is that no salvation is offered to his characters. We are never allowed to see farther than the enclosed skulls and memories, the constant looking back with no promise of a forwards. For the characters life is a purgatory that is only broken by death, but death holds no other meaning than the end to both their suffering and their existence. This is something we have already seen in Watt's existence within Mr. Knott's house. In this earlier example the same thing is happening. Rather than the purgatory being a time served that will allow Watt to pass into Heaven, which is to say the pinnacle of understanding, he instead realises there is no resolution to his purgatory. It is simply the state of existence we all must share and it is this which makes him lose his mind. The character of Dante within *The Divine Comedy* is not an Everyman figure in the literal sense and of course the work is not supposed to represent all our journeys after death. Indeed, as much as the three constituent parts of the trilogy are theological narratives they are also heavily coloured by domestic Italian politics of the time.¹²² Despite this there is a universality in the message to be taken from the works. We are united in that we will be judged and subsequently see out the rest of eternity in heaven or hell. Yet, for Beckett we are under the same conditions to an even greater extent. We stand together as creatures who attempt to ascribe meaning and purpose to life and a belief in knowing what will occur after it ends. However, what the arbitrary and unforgiving nature of Beckett's world

¹²² Reflected in many of the discussions Dante has with the inhabitants of hell and purgatory is the Florentine politics that he and his family were so heavily involved with. We see through his own position the voracity of his beliefs and the consequent danger he faced at various points in his life.

illustrates is that we are all at the whim of chance, with aporia and lack of meaning the true defining abstractions of our existence and the crumbling of our physical bodies one of the few truths to hold on to. It is these inescapable conditions that bind us together with the doppelgänger narrators of the novellas, eroding the idea of agency over fate.

Intratextuality and Reflection

The level of intratextuality within the novellas and Beckett's work in general is an issue that raises many more questions however. With these 1946 works the similarity in traits, habits, inclinations and physicality of the narrators creates a sphere for an ongoing dialogue in which the approach Beckett finds to discussing his central issues can be added to, modified and looked back upon. The concern here is not that the various narrators may in fact be the same character and this type of resolvable conclusion is not a possibility Beckett offers. Rather, what we have is the creation of an archetype; a figure who through various incarnations becomes shorthand for a set of behaviours and linked concerns central to the prose. We can see in various examples from the novellas how this continuity of attributes is built into the characters. In *The Expelled* the narrator notes of the carriage driver, who is letting the former stay in his house overnight, that

I would only have confused him by saying that I could tolerate no furniture in my room except the bed, and that all the other pieces, and even the night-table, had to be removed before I would consent to set foot in it. (TEX, p. 256.)

In *First Love* the narrator is, as discussed, a very different figure from those of the other three works and yet also cannot abide furniture in a room he occupies. On agreeing to live with his variously-named lover he instructs her of the requisite requirements for such an arrangement¹²³, which include a separate room he proceeds to empty of its contents, out into the hall. The pervading sense of negation and subtraction within these works is

123 This occurs over several pages, the narrator requesting a series of arbitrary things, as in the following example: 'I asked her if it would not be possible, now and then, to have a parsnip. A parsnip! She cried, as if I had asked for a dish of sucking Jew.' TEX, pp. 244-245.

purposefully overbearing. Furthermore, the almost ghostly world we find in the novellas is a key component in binding these characters. Often Beckett brings together opposing sentiments and by a process of repetition creates new associations. In *The End* we see, as part of the scatological nature of the works, one example of Beckett's associating faeces and love. Again looking to the episode in which the narrator travels to a remote cabin in the wilderness the narrator enters and takes note that 'In a cowpad a heart had been traced, pierced by an arrow. And yet there was nothing to attract tourists.' (TE, p. 285.) The bleak humour of this episode is echoed in *First Love* in which the narrator speaks of 'inscribing the letters of Lulu [his love's name] in an old heifer pat.' (FL, p. 237.) These are signposts of the collective nature of the novellas' world and the characters who occupy it, but it is from the content of the narratives that unfold and the overt aspects of the protagonists appearance these impressions are solidified. Physicality is again elevated above any assumed context of dismissal as one of the least significant aspects of humanity. These characters are covered in visual signifiers, specifically the rotting skulls already discussed but also the hats which cover them and particularly their greatcoats, which will become synonymous with the Beckettian hero. The effect of these visual motifs is to bring the characters together as illustrative examples of men in decline, of beings unable to accept the fragility of their understanding, who are battered and bruised into awareness, reduced to husks of a suggested past existence.

As I have already noted there are infrequent moments in these works that break from the strictly descriptive aspects discussed thus far. It is due to the sparseness of their appearances within the novellas that they carry a greater weight than they may have in Beckett's earlier work. Due to the sprawling style he brings to the fore at this point, it is difficult to isolate specific examples, but in the following instance one can see the stark

contrast created. Breaking into the narrative with a metafictional interjection the character of *The End* comments 'That's all a pack of lies I feel.' (TE, p. 278.) Levy comments on this kind of intrusion saying 'The narrator knows full well that, despite their convincing attention to concrete detail, his stories are mere illusions, and so he often balks at continuing the ruse...' ¹²⁴ There are a few examples of this blatant disregard for maintaining the illusion of reality within the work that was so dominant in Beckett's prose prior to the novellas. However, in general the novels will no longer include this type of interjection. It could be argued by this point in both Beckett's career and in literature in general the fracture in narrative as a straightforward tool of mimesis was so pronounced to be self-evident. What are more striking are the moments in which the characters reflect upon and give insight into their own situations. Again these will be phased out over time, but in the four novellas they offer a great degree of insight into the purpose of the works. As I will go on to discuss these men are all to various degrees exiles in their own homes. They live among others in an apparitional Dublin ¹²⁵, but they are so removed in their interactions to seem like spectators looking in. At one point in *The End* the narrator comments

One day I caught sight of my son. He was striding along with a briefcase under his arm. He took off his hat and bowed and I saw he was as bald as a coot. I was almost certain it was he. I turned round to gaze after him. He went bustling along on his duck feet, bowing and scraping and flourishing his hat left and right. The insufferable son of a bitch. (TE, p. 283.)

This incident is recounted as if the narrator is both there and not there, stuck in a kind of limbo in which he is forced to view episodes of a past life. At some points it is as if what's suggested is a kind of ultra-awareness of the mind-body separation which would of course

¹²⁴ Levy, pp. 109-110.

¹²⁵ Gerry Dukes notes in his introduction to another edition of the novellas that 'Irish readers need no further clues as to the settings of the novellas: mountains to the south, a great bay with flashing beacons and a lightship, a city – with two canals – built at the mouth of a river. The inevitable conclusion is that the events, in general, are set in Dublin and environs.' Samuel Beckett, *First Love and Other Novellas* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 2-3. It is also noted by Dukes however that there are suggestions of an infusion of Beckett's new home of Paris, helping to make the city both familiar and unfamiliar to readers. This is supported by the following quotation from *The End*: 'In the street I was lost. I had not set foot in this part of the city for a long time and it seemed greatly changed. Whole buildings had disappeared, the palings had changed positions, and on all sides I saw, in great letters, the names of tradesmen I had never seen before and would have been at a loss to pronounce.' TE, p. 278.

be very in keeping with the rationalist preoccupations of previously discussed works.¹²⁶ Again, it is in *The End* we find one of the most significant disruptions of the strict descriptive approach the works follow for their majority. Beckett said that with English it was too easy to veer into the poetic and I think we can see with this example how the transition to French did not empty his work of poetic language, but allowed it to rise from the strange convergence of the mundane and the speculative which these works contain on occasion. The narrator reflects that

To know I had a being, however faint and false, outside of me, had once had the power to stir my heart. You become unsociable, it's inevitable. It's enough to make you wonder sometimes if you are on the right planet. Even the words desert you, it's as bad as that. Perhaps it's the moment when the vessels stop communicating, you know, the vessels. There you are still between the two murmurs, it must be the same old song as ever, but Christ you wouldn't think so. (TE, p. 291.)

Here we find a great deal of ambiguity as to what is actually being discussed, but the typically playful and disruptive Beckettian humour in 'You become unsociable, it's inevitable' cuts through the context of lofty abstraction and refuses to allow the reader a measure of reassurance that this is the serious moment, and one we should treat accordingly. There is another intratextual call-back to *Watt*, with the admission that in the absence of certainty and sure knowledge language can no longer find a home in the narrator's mind and mouth. The vessels may be a reference to the mind-body issue, but it could just as easily be the loosened consciousness of the dead, looking back on the transition from life to its current state. Certainly Caselli sees the possibility that the protagonist of *The End*'s 'voice comes from beyond the grave.'¹²⁷ There is nothing explicit in the idea of these now uncommunicative vessels to suggest death, but in the unreal world Beckett creates in the story, the mentioning of a person's 'being' and the suggestion all of this happened at a distant time and place, a context is certainly created. So 'vessels' begins to suggest bodies, which is to say vessels for consciousness or even the soul, depending on

¹²⁶ This can be seen in the first two chapters of this thesis in particular, which deal with *Murphy* and *Watt*.

¹²⁷ Caselli, p. 121.

how far one wishes to take the theological import we have just been discussing. The end of their communication could be another way of describing the moment one is literally removed from the world of people and the 'two murmurs' could be read as life and death, with the character trapped in some sort of limbo between the two.

Later in the story, after swallowing the calmative, the narrator again breaks into a more abstract and poetic form of speaking and gives us the clearest indication he has already died:

The sea, the sky, the mountains and the islands closed in and crushed me in a mighty systole, then scattered to the the utmost confines of space. The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end or the strength to go on. (TE, p. 293.)

This first sentence seems to bring the narrative we have been told back to its origins in time. It is as if what has thus far been said has simply been a replaying of the character's life up until the point he imbibes the sedative and embraces death. There are echoes of the purgatorial state he seems to occupy when he says 'without the courage to end or the strength to go on.' Looking again at the ending of *The Expelled* it is so strikingly similar one could imagine the conclusions of the stories being interchangeable. Again it is the self-conscious awareness of the subjective fiction of the narrative and its insignificance as part of death which is most striking:

When I am abroad in the morning I go to meet the sun, and in the evening, when I am abroad, I follow it, till I am down among the dead. I don't know why I told this story. I could just as well have told another. Perhaps some other time I'll be able to tell another. Living souls, you will see how alike they are. (TEX, p. 259.)

It must surely be *The Calmative* that speculates on the mortality of the narrators most overtly. Commenting both on the artificial nature of storytelling itself, as well as the multiplicity of constructed narratives within the novellas the narrator supplements the reflections we see within *The End* and *The Expelled*, saying

So I'll tell myself a story, I'll try and tell myself another story, to try and calm myself, and it's there I feel I'll be old, old, even older than the day I fell, calling for help, and it came. Or is it possible that in this story I have come back to life, after my death? No, it's not like me to come back to life, after my death. (TC, p. 261.)

Again, with the final sentence of the quotation the bleak humour of Beckett punctures the seriousness of the sentiment being expressed. We have direct reference paid to the possibility these stories may be told from an entity already dead. This type of conception adds much to the notion the characters are in a kind of hell or purgatory.

Returning to the idea of the novellas as tales of an Everyman figure then the most telling quotation is the following self-examination: 'I'll tell my story in the past none the less, as though it were a myth, or an old fable, for this evening I need another age, that age to become another age in which I become what I was.' (TC, p. 262.) This idea of the novellas being fables of course adds to the previous discussion of how much each story can be seen as driven by a didactic purpose. It is particularly interesting to view *First Love* in this light, being of course at a certain distance from the other works as well as drawn to them by previously discussed character traits and thematic concerns. We can see by the undeniably strange and unrecognisable version of love that the title of the story is not without a degree of irony. Due to its isolation from the other novellas but more importantly the universality of its main theme it is *First Love* that appears most clearly to fall into the realms of fable. The notion of these novellas as fables does seem particularly apposite considering the unreal, semi-formed worlds they portray. The significance of this and Beckett repeatedly stressing these are stories, particularly at their conclusion, leads one to think of what kind of message or moral we can take from them. When the narrator of *The Expelled* notes 'I don't know why I told this story. I could just as well have told another.' (TEX, p. 259.) Beckett comes closest to revealing the import of these admissions. There is, in this focus upon the fiction of what the narrators have to tell us, a destabilising

of narrative authority that suggests no matter what story was being told it would be insufficient to deal with the issues that are the novellas' concern. A focus such as this, across intratextual links, suggests narratives that are part of an indefinite series expressing an insurmountable ineffability. One can see in the focus on death, the focus on debased, crumbling bodies and the allusions to Dante we have discussed an illustration of the difficulties inherent in trying to understand the world and respond to it. This is of course a concern we have seen Beckett explore to varying extents within *Murphy* and *Watt*, but perhaps the difference in these novellas is the almost mythic, fable-like nature of the stories. This shift signals moves towards modes that do not just comment on unknowability and ineffability, but through the creation of the Beckettian archetype and worlds that are ragged, unfinished and often implied, rather than detailed the greater possibility of response. These are issues we shall explore in much greater depth in following chapters on The Trilogy, but we can see in the novellas the seeds of a prose form that will run through the twin-narratives of *Molloy*, the fixation on storytelling of *Malone Dies*, and the terminally open-ended world of *The Unnamable*.

Beckett's Love

In terms of how these stories conclude nothing is more universal than death and *The Expelled*, *The Calmative* and *The End* focus on a concern we all share for what comes after life and how to approach its impending arrival. Yet, the subject of *First Love* are experiences far more palpable to a readership embroiled in the fabric of life and not its often ignored end. As already discussed it is Badiou who most acutely theorises the conception of love within Beckett, arguing for the existence of the Beckettian TWO; the coupling both sexual and non-sexual that dominates much of his work. Again, I would say that this more tangible form of love is something we see played out with greater regularity

within Beckett's theatre pieces. Of the postwar fiction the greatest example of THE TWO may in fact be *Mercier and Camier*, but it seems clear that following this work Beckett saw drama as a more appropriate vehicle for this particular form of relationship. Indeed, on reading *Mercier and Camier* one feels a sense of distance or abstraction from the issues that are actually under the microscope. In the plays Beckett does not surprise us by having his characters as mouthpieces for his beliefs about the nature of the love between two individuals. Rather, he uses dialogue as a mechanism in which little is said directly about the nature of a relationship and yet often through what is left unsaid insight is offered. The novellas on the other hand, in the same manner as much of the late fiction, do not deal with prolonged pairings. *First Love* is the exception and in the interactions between the narrator and his love we find the genesis for the twos to follow in The Trilogy.

In this novella we have an unusual love story in that the protagonist is one of Beckett's detached, socially inept heroes, wandering through life in a stupor, confused by the world but with a crushing awareness that confusion is the most one can hope for. If it can be called falling in love then the object of the narrator's affections is a prostitute with whom he drifts into a relationship, rather than through any sort of desire. Throughout the story the narrator reflects on the kind of love he feels for Lulu, or Anna as he later decides to name her. This forgetting her name does nothing but add to the sense of unintentional and purposeless companionship and further, like the other stories, seems a memory from a distant past, resurrected from fractured details, and certainly not the perspective of the narrator as he now exists. He will often speak of a pure love, a love abstract and not embroiled with the base and physical preoccupations we have seen as so central to these characters. He remarks

Yes, I loved her, it's the name I gave, still give alas, to what I was doing then. I had nothing to go by, having never loved before, but of course had heard of the thing, at

home, in school, in brothels and at church, and read romances, in prose and verse, under the guidance of my tutor, in six or seven languages, both dead and living, in which it was handled at length. (FL, pp. 236-237.)

There is the mention of a brothel which adds to our understanding of the character's experience of love, but the other examples present an idealised version taken from years of education on love in its loftier forms. Later in the story we have the questioning of such an idea, particularly in contrast to the carnal desires he feels. He asks 'Are we to infer from this I loved her with that intellectual love which drew from me such drivel, in another place? Somehow I think not.' (FL, p. 238.) There is a suggestion here of an older or alternative narration in which the character may have felt more inclined to platitudes of perfect love. One could also read this as a reference to Beckett's earlier work and in particular *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* which is certainly a cynical work, but one that draws on all of Beckett's learning in its descriptions of the protagonist's affairs.

The love Beckett envisions in the novellas is oppositional. He is writing against a tradition which has sought to place love on a hierarchical system with a pure love at the pinnacle, untainted by desire. Of course the influence of the Catholic church on the collective consciousness of his native Ireland cannot be underestimated. We can see in the legacy left by thinkers like Joyce's favourite Thomas Aquinas, the restrictions placed on the love between two people and its distance from the honourable and purest form, the love of God. Aquinas would have it that passion and desire are animalistic and something part of our nature we must try and overcome. He writes 'The appetitive power associated with sensory cognition is one we share with nonhuman animals – a cluster of inclinations (passions) to which we are subject (passive) by nature.'¹²⁸ This is a view with a genesis stretching back to Socratic philosophy. In Plato's most overt dialogue on the subject, *The Symposium*, it is

¹²⁸ *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. by Norman Kretzmann & Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 145.

the love of wisdom which is seen as the pinnacle of the emotion. In the work Socrates and several friends present arguments on the nature of love. Socrates argues in favour of what he was told by the seer Diotima, that love of wisdom is the highest form and that analogous to the procreation of new life is a higher form in which the lover of wisdom gives birth to intellectual children, who will not diminish but instead achieve an immortality greater than humanity.

This is the legacy the novellas respond to, delineating their own ideas on love in sharp contrast. We find this most overtly in the interactions the narrator of *First Love* has with Lulu. They meet by chance whilst sharing a bench and during one of their first encounters there is a moment of physical contact we have already looked at. The narrator notes 'She began stroking my ankles. I considered kicking her in the cunt.' (FL, p. 234.) As Badiou notes 'Love as a matter of *truth* (and not of opinion) depends upon a pure event: an encounter whose strength radically exceeds both sentimentality and sexuality.'¹²⁹ "Pure" is not the most appropriate term for the love of the narrator, but the ground of simultaneous longing and disgust he feels certainly seems to hold power by subverting all 'sentimentality and sexuality'. It is Beckett's method to mock love, dragging it down from any perceived hierarchical height down into the reality of life with his cutting humour. It is a twisted, uneven love between two differing but equally lost individuals Beckett uses for this comedy, with the narrator asking the reader things like 'would I have been tracing my name in old cowshit if my love had been pure and disinterested?' (FL, p. 237.) In the wake of their sexual encounter he says 'I looked at my member. If only it could have spoken! Enough of that. It was my night of love.' (FL, p. 243.) We can see in examples like this that despite his differing age and circumstances the narrator of this novella is cut from the same cloth as the other three. He is a variation of the archetype, still disgusted entirely with humanity

¹²⁹ Badiou, p. 28.

but also inextricably drawn toward it. This is the attitude he is to take into the relationship he embarks upon with his prostitute lover and we get the sense of an even greater disgust with himself in that he is, by virtue of his humanity, a victim of this physically compelled process of coupling. This is the inevitability Aquinas discusses, but the difference for Beckett's characters is that there is no possibility of lifting themselves out of their baser instincts, towards a higher form of love. In fact, as they achieve greater awareness they become more and more attached to the slender comfort they find in focus on the body.

In the end the work's perspective on love, and the abandoning of his lover and their newborn babe by the protagonist, is made clear by a symbol as clear as any in Beckett's work. Examining the gravestone of his father he notes the date of his death is the same as his marriage. If we need a stronger symbol of the continuity of experience between the younger narrator of *First Love* and the other dying men then this will suffice. The story conceives love as not occupying a distance from the base and the physical, but instead as emblematic of the true ground these concepts must fight upon. If they are to be examined as having any true meaning then they cannot be abstracted in the way literature and philosophy have historically done. The association between love and death is again one forced by Beckett, suggesting love is another example of our desire to romanticise death. Rather than a love of God, it is the emotionally and physically unfulfilling relationship between these two examples of societal detachment that is the most we can expect. Again, as Kierkegaard writes 'Death has no need of explanation and certainly has never requested any thinker to be of assistance. But the living need the explanation – and why? In order to live accordingly.'¹³⁰ They need a higher power and the suggestion of an afterlife, but of course this merely reflects their lives, and life in the novellas is a vulgar and hopeless affair. Despite *First Love* having the greatest amount of content in terms of a discussion of

¹³⁰ Kierkegaard, p. 99.

love we need to turn to the other three novellas to get a sense of love at its broadest and most inclusive level.

It is an absence of love that is most felt by these characters. This is not in the sense they do not have partners or even companions, but a much more basic lack of self-love, the true tragedy of their condition. These men will often hint at a past life or earlier stage of development in which, rather than being on the margins of society, they were participants in life in a fuller sense. We can take the narrator of *The End* who we have already seen has a son, indicating not only his age, but also letting us know that he has come to be distanced from a life that would entail a family and relationships with others. These characters are haunted by an awareness that will plague all of Beckett's late protagonists. It is the knowledge of his vision, both revelatory and damning. This awareness that a total understanding, a certainty of even the most rudimentary elements of the universe will always be out of reach is a burden too heavy to bear. They become so unsettled by the knowledge that to continue to live in the same way is simply an impossibility. We encounter them in the final stages of their lives and by this time they are not even self-interested enough to maintain their health and hygiene. Basic relations with fellow human beings have become devoid of meaning. They are suffering from a tragic lack of self-love, brought on by an awareness of the apparent meaninglessness of self-love. On the space Kierkegaard's writing on love opens up for future artists, Rick Anthony Furtak hypothesises 'it would have to be one [a form or writing] that allows us to come to terms with the predicament of a situated human being, rather than abstracting the human being away from his or her connections with the world.'¹³¹ I would argue this is precisely the reins Beckett's novellas of 1946 take up.

¹³¹ Rick Anthony Furtak, 'Natural and Commanded Love'; repr. in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: philosophical engagements*, ed. by Edward F. Mooney (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2008), p. 68.

Exile

Arising from this absence of love is a sense of not belonging, of homelessness the characters embody. As we have seen there are indications within the works that these men were once part of the society they now find themselves isolated from. The idea of exile is one not peculiar to these four novellas but indeed is the condition of many Beckett characters and as the works progress this theme will come to be central and recurring. Many critics¹³² have speculated that the reason for its prominence may have had as much to do with Beckett's own circumstances as any existential concern.¹³³ Like his mentor Joyce, Beckett felt a great deal of restriction and hostility in his native Ireland. Aside from visiting his family and occasional trips home to receive honours Beckett remained in self-imposed exile for the majority of his adult life. Yet, the setting of his works is almost always identifiable as Dublin and environs. He became part of a tradition of writers living outside Ireland and yet still writing of it. What differs in the novellas in terms of the content of exile compared to earlier works is not the attitude of the author, but the technique he uses to render the idea behind its self-imposed nature and its necessity.

Of course *The End* and *The Expelled* begin with the narrators being evicted from their respective homes and trying to find new lodgings, but these are merely the most obvious examples of narratives of exile we can see through the works. The characters are again united in that they occupy positions on the fringes of society, as aliens in their communities who share fleeting interactions with fellow citizens that only confirm their distance from others. Through them Beckett personifies the most extreme version of this type of exile.

¹³² As in David Lloyd, who in *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1993) offers a post-colonial reading of *First Love*, looking at similar issues as I have explored in this chapter. Issues such as bodily degradation are examined from the entirely different perspective of the legacy of colonialism as it weaves its way into Beckett's writing.

¹³³ Both John Fletcher and Linda Ben-Zvi write extensively on this in their works *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* and *Samuel Beckett* respectively.

There is a tracing of a process that continues from what has been discussed in the previous chapter on *Watt*. We have here characters that begin life much like any other, but at a certain stage reach a level of awareness over the failure of not only the established institutions of religion and state but also at a much more fundamental level of the building blocks of interaction. With the collapse of this assuredness over language they, unlike Beckett, remain in their homeland but are driven to a level of detachment and madness by the unsettling effect their awareness has brought them. We can see in *First Love* for example a character much more able to engage with the world and its inhabitants. In contrast to this by the time of the other stories the characters have so detached themselves from the thinking world they are only concerned with the physical ailments that arrest their attention. We are allowed an insight into this process in fleeting moments of recollection within stories such as *The Expelled*. The narrator comments 'But I still knew how to act at this period, when it was absolutely necessary.' (TEX, p. 250.) In the present however he is at the mercy of a controlling disorientation and sense of living within someone else's body. His surroundings also have an uncanny feel, noting of the Dublin-like city 'I did not know the town very well, scene of my birth and of my first steps in this world, and then of all the others, so many that I thought all trace of me was lost, but I was wrong.' (TEX, p. 250.) Despite the fact this has been his home his entire life it still feels unfamiliar to him, another part of the distance from a suggested past existence. The narrator of *The Calmative* says, in a revealing remark 'there was never any city but the one.' (TC, p. 261.) In the novellas there are moments when we can feel the influence of Paris in the reminiscence of the narrator, but in general it is the sense of loss at being in Dublin but also excluded from it that so perplexes, exhausts and destabilises the narrators. Again we have a problem of love. In this case it is the loss of fraternity, of being part of one's home and the inability to surmount or ignore the burden of knowledge.

Stylistically these stories employ a variety of techniques in order to render and compliment this theme of exile and isolation, but the most significant is the change from the third to the first-person mode of narration. As discussed these four novellas are the work Beckett sets about following his revelation that the mode of writing most appropriate for his own needs would seek to explore negation and absence. It seems that with the switch to French he was able to free himself from the shackles of his native tongue. In addition Beckett changes from the third-person, which has been his preferred mode in previous works, obviously feeling that the first-person offers the chance to render the particular voice of these characters in a far more idiosyncratic manner. Furthermore it allows the reader an insight into the level of distance the characters feel from both the events and the people that they come into contact with. Beckett's previous prose efforts are by no means exercises in realism, but these new works have a dream-like quality, a new level of subjective reality ideally suited to the ambiguity of the world he creates. Beckett sought to write 'without style'¹³⁴ during this time, and by this we can infer he meant outwith a recognisable tradition which would detract from the isolated feel of the world he creates. The question of whether these characters are dead is not one that we need to try and resolve. Death is so heavily involved in the content of the novellas because, as we have seen, it is their primary concern. Beckett moves us inside the mind of these further evolved archetypes, allowing a new level of subjectivity in which he manipulates time, setting and speech to create a hellish world reflecting their inner state.

The emphasis is on an exaggerated illustration of the reality that the state of death, as Kierkegaard argues, merely reflects our state of living and that in order to understand the former we must reject a history of attempts to abstract and formalise it. On more than one

134 Knowlson, p. 357.

occasion within *At A Graveside* he will describe the “earnest person”, which is to say he who truly seeks knowledge of death, but in the end concludes his investigations will always mirror what he believes to be the character of life: 'Earnestness, then, understands the same thing about death, that it is indefinable by inequality, that no age or circumstance or life situation is a safeguard against it, but thereupon the earnest person understands it in another way and understands himself.'¹³⁵ Beckett suggests that if we wish to find new avenues of exploration then the place to start is with the very opposite of abstract reflection; with the cruel, the lustful and the repulsive. These post-war novellas represent the start of Beckett writing prose that rather than merely commenting on a history of philosophy and theology aims to produce a new kind of philosophical enterprise through fiction. In the forthcoming chapter on *Molloy* we shall see how this is developed from a form that acts in opposition to a metaphysical tradition to one that begins forging original answers to the most fundamental questions.

¹³⁵ Kierkegaard, p. 93.

Chapter Four:

Molloy – An Endpoint in Beckett's Prose?

In the previous chapter I attempted to demonstrate the undervalued significance of Beckett's 1946 novellas in an appreciation of the author's philosophical position and work in general. If these works were laying the foundations of repetitive concerns in form and content, then it is with the seminal Trilogy: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* that these concerns were built upon and taken to their endpoint.

Molloy came out of a period of intense creativity, but also poverty. Although the 1946 works were a significant progression from Beckett's English language efforts, they were not well received and in some cases unpublished for years to come. Nevertheless these works 'marked the beginning of an extraordinarily fertile period during which he produced four stories, four novels and two plays, all written in French...' ¹³⁶ Finding a publisher that would accept *Molloy* and the other two works of The Trilogy was a lengthy task, mostly undertaken by Beckett's wife Suzanne, who had an unfaltering belief in the worth of her husband's work. Eventually her persistence paid off and alongside *Waiting for Godot* it was the works from this period which established Beckett's reputation and that many still consider his best.

Bearing in mind what we have established in previous chapters we will look at *Molloy* as another developmental work, but one that reaches a zenith in terms of the fusion of form and content. I am going to look at a variety of areas we have thus far discussed as prototypical, from narrative technique and language, through to genre and more abstract concerns such as time. The issue now is that, if Beckett has by this point found the ideal

¹³⁶ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 358.

vehicle for his ideas, can we identify and formalise these and should that be our principal concern?

A New First-Person Mode

The first thing to note about *Molloy's* mode of first person narration is that it is not so much an evolution of previous forms, as a rejection of them. As we have noted, Beckett was attracted more and more to the minimal, to absence and negation, as opposed to attempts at encompassing something real or full. The two halves of the novel are autobiographical reminiscences of the protagonists, Molloy and Moran. It is important to recognise that as opposed to something like *Ulysses* the stories the two men tell are in fact written down, being books within the book if you will. Both are writing of the journey they took to bring them to their present state, with Molloy being handed blank pages and told to fill them by an anonymous figure, and Moran writing his report supposedly for the purposes of his job as a private investigator. This said, the method of both the men is not one of calculated remembrance, but in fact seems a much more fluid invoking of the past, with both appearing to exist in the texts as if it were the present. This is evidenced by the seemingly concurrent ways their consciousness moves, often engaging with the next part of the story. In *Proust*, Beckett's early monograph on *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927) he of course speaks of the book's most famous element: its usage of involuntary memory.¹³⁷ This indeed seems to directly feature in Molloy and Moran's narratives, with both experiencing involuntary memory that shifts and displaces them from the linearity of their narrative throughout their respective journeys. In terms of form this is achieved with the use of irregular punctuation and the rejection of stringent grammatical rules. In the following example we can see past and present tenses converging and creating a fused recollection:

¹³⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (1931); repr. in Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*, IV (New York: Grove Press, 2006), p. 7.

My name is Molloy, I cried, all of a sudden, now I remember. Nothing compelled me to give this information, but I gave it, hoping to please I suppose. They let me keep my hat on, I don't know why. Is it your mother's name? said the sergeant, it must have been a sergeant. Molloy, I cried, my name is Molloy. Is that your mother's name? said the sergeant. What? I said. Your name is Molloy, said the sergeant. Yes, I said, now I remember. And your mother? said the sergeant. I didn't follow. Is your mother's name Molloy too? said the sergeant. I thought it over. Your mother, said the sergeant, is your mother's—Let me think! I cried. (MO, pp. 18-19.)

One can also get a sense from this passage just how Beckett's style of first person narration differs from the modernist stream-of-consciousness approach. Looking again to the realisation we examined in the opening chapter of this thesis, which allowed him to move into his own distinct mode of writing, he noted his move away from emulation of Joyce.

Beckett said:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.¹³⁸

Although we can see the roots of this awakening in the previous prose efforts, it is with *Molloy* that Beckett truly begins to find the ways and means most appropriate to achieving the negation in form and content he seeks. Molloy is a character who embodies this idea; he is essentially a vessel through whom knowledge flows, but who has only the most minimal semblance of order and retention. As shown in the following passage in which he speaks of his mother, his narrative is characterised by its rambling, fervent nature:

She never called me son, fortunately, I couldn't have borne it, but Dan, I don't know why, my name is not Dan. Dan was my father's name perhaps, yes, perhaps she took me for my father. I took her for my mother and she took me for my father. Dan, you remember the day I saved the swallow. Dan, you remember the day you buried the ring. I remembered, I remembered, I mean I knew more or less what she was talking about, and if I hadn't always taken part personally in the scenes she evoked, it was just as if I had. (MO, p. 13.)

The style Beckett chooses for Molloy is also highly dependent on qualifications, which often mount one upon another, giving a dizzying impression in which the reader struggles to keep up with the original idea. These qualifications are also a very effective way to

138 Knowlson, p. 134.

render a situation humorous, frequently acting as a “reveal”, as in the previous example. Molloy says ‘I remembered, I remembered’ as if he is in the throws of reminiscence, only to immediately make the idea preposterous by stating that he of course wasn’t involved in the memories his mother is recalling but could pretend he was by his familiarity with the scenarios she is describing. This comedic device is essential to the new modes Beckett employs in *Molloy* and is something I will return to.

What one also notes about Molloy’s narrative style is that it is often written in abrupt sentences, rarely with paragraph breaks, flitting from one subject to another, with certain expositional elements being left for the reader to infer. The result of this is an impression of urgency to everything Molloy says, forcing one to follow the narrative at the rapid pace it sets. Alongside the often multiple qualifications, asides, tangents and purposefully missing elements the reader is left with a very distinct impression, one that can be seen most clearly in the context of ‘impoverishment’ Beckett was so keen to achieve. In Gilles Deleuze’s famous essay on Beckett, ‘The Exhausted’, he describes Beckett’s method of writing as related to the combinatorial:

The combinatorial is the art or science of exhausting the possible through inclusive disjunctions. But only an exhausted person can exhaust the possible, because he has renounced all need, preference, goal, or signification.¹³⁹

This is what has just been emphasised. These ‘inclusive disjunctions’ Deleuze describes are in fact the aforementioned relentless qualifications that pervade Molloy’s speech. The exhausted person is Molloy, free from the usual restrictions of society and with needs, preferences, goals or significations that he may immediately want, but which on closer inspection Beckett reveals to be a meaningless bad joke. Deleuze goes as far as saying that in a sense the matter which is exhausted, the spaces our protagonist moves through, are in

¹³⁹ Gilles Deleuze, ‘The Exhausted’, in *Essays Critical and Cultural*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), p. 154.

fact unimportant as their essence is (purposefully) never open to us. It is the process, the 'inclusive disjunctions' and what they illustrate that matters.

Before actually moving onto speculation about the purpose behind what may initially seem a counter-productive aim it is worthwhile to look at the other half of *Molloy*. In a sense the splitting of the novel into two distinct and yet inter-related parts is familiar territory for Beckett. *Waiting for Godot* (1949) was famously described, in a quotation which has become a cliché in itself, as 'the play in which nothing happens, twice'.¹⁴⁰ Whether or not this glib summary does justice to the play it is indeed a very neat way to bring out the similarities with *Molloy*. In Moran's narrative we are not initially given the same gibbering, yet highly revealing fool that is Molloy, but by the end the very distinct lines separating the two have blurred. In the following excerpt from the first page of Moran's half of the novel he recalls his initial involvement in the Molloy case:

I remember the day I received the order to see about Molloy. It was a Sunday in summer. I was sitting in my little garden, in a wicker chair, a black book closed on my knees. It must have been about eleven o'clock, still too early to go to church. I was savouring the day of rest, while deploring the importance attached to it, in certain parishes. (MO, p. 87.)

First of all what should be noted are the circumstances of Moran, in so far as they relate to the style his narrative adopts. Whereas Molloy is a homeless vagrant with a fixed attachment to nothing, Moran is a relatively successful private investigator with a house, son, maid and a serious, if somewhat absurd devotion to the church. This opposition is reflected strongly in the styles of speech the two men use. In stark contrast to Molloy's often incoherent ramblings, Moran employs a straightforward, traditional form of narration, recalling the series of events as they happened with the journalistic rigour of someone confident in the actuality of what they say. Perhaps the one area in which the two men's narratives are similar is in their usage of abrupt sentences, although for Moran this

¹⁴⁰ Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. xii.

seems reflective of his simplified worldview rather than any kind of disparate, unsettled consciousness.

That is at least what we find at first upon comparing the two. It is only later in the novel that the eccentricities we observe in Moran's character expand and fill his consciousness, dislocating the simple binary relationship he understood himself to have with the world. Following the extraordinarily long preamble to their journey, Moran and his son venture out, apparently in mind of some unknown force, on foot and into the wilderness. Trying to find Molloy, what then occurs are a series of changes in Moran directly parallel to the reduced circumstances the two face whilst supposedly on the case. Both physically and mentally he rapidly deteriorates, the oddities evident at the beginning of his journey expanding to dominate and hinder their progress. In the following passage we can see that the questioning aspect of Moran has come to plague his thought, with that which has been said, unsaid, intended and unintended obsessing him completely:

What did he tell you? I said. I don't understand, said Gaber. You were saying a minute ago that he had told you something, I said, then I cut you short. Short? Said Gaber. Do you know what he told me the other day, I said, those were your very words. His face lit up. The clod was just about as quick as my son. He said to me, said Gaber, Gaber, he said—. Louder! I cried. He said to me, said Gaber, Gaber, he said, life is a thing of beauty, Gaber, and a joy for ever. (MO, p. 158.)

If we are to compare this to the conversation Moran and Gaber have at the beginning of the novel, when the latter sends him in pursuit of Molloy, we form a very different picture. The two informed men communicating with supposedly perfect understanding have been reduced to speaking at crossed purposes; confusion now reigning as the principal mode Moran's speech and thought adopt in his new consciousness. What is more, the fundamental breaking down and making suspect of Moran's understanding of life, thought, communication and religion is matched and indeed works symbiotically with his growing physical incapacities. What surprises Moran at the very start of the novel when his knee is

attacked by a sudden spasm of pain, comes to be normal for him as he witnesses his leg stiffen and stop working all together. In both his physical and mental breakdowns there is an erosion of the distance between Molloy and Moran. The speech of the two is almost the same, with the above example being nearly identical to the previously quoted episode in which Molloy is taken to the police station. More and more as the novel progresses the latter comes to resemble the former and towards the end of the novel the two are almost the same character. In this we can see a development of narrative technique begun with the 1946 novellas. In those we had the first person narrative positioning us in the mind of these doppelgänger vagrants, but in *Molloy* Beckett has developed his approach. In the sprawling, clause-laden speech of Molloy he illustrates the idiosyncratic nature of his mental decline, with language again the overt symptom. This new synergy of form and content is a progression we see mirrored in Moran's language impairment, as well as the failure of his body, which is again something we have seen featured heavily in the novellas. *Molloy* is an evolution of these tools. The ideas Beckett communicates are largely unchanged, but the methods he uses are far better realised for his purpose.

The Character of *Molloy*

This said, what I will try to show in this chapter is that tools like Beckett's narrative choices, are not made towards a single, definitive philosophical enterprise as some have argued. Rather, *Molloy*, and indeed the majority of Beckett's prose output, contain and are exercises in modes of thought which have already been sketched briefly, but which I seek to make more palpable. If Beckett's work is fundamentally defined by its attempts to progress within the spheres of negation, reduction and absence is this something we can locate and pinpoint within a novel like *Molloy*? The narrative choices we have just examined are a prime example that not only can we find these ideas put into practice, but

furthermore, that by examining them closely we can understand to a much fuller degree their purpose. It is no accident that Molloy and Moran are writers, no decision Beckett made for the purposes of maintaining a more realistic plot. It is abundantly clear, opening a page of Beckett at random and reading a few paragraphs, that realism, as a style, is not something he is interested in. For one thing we can say that having the two protagonists of *Molloy* as authors brings about a blurring of the lines between the author and his work. If we are to examine the central character of Beckett's novels as essentially the same entity, albeit under different guises as the processes of evolution and refinement dictate, then we begin to see how the choice to have Molloy and Moran as authors makes perfect sense. Indeed Beckett makes no qualms about the fact that with each successive character he creates he is trying to move closer to a better realised embodiment of the ideas he fixates upon. Metafictional and intratextual references abound as testament to this awareness, as in the following example in which Moran's consciousness is stretched to breaking point:

Oh the stories I could tell you, if I were easy. What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others. I would have believed that – yes, I believe it willingly. Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not tell this one. (MO, p. 142.)

Throughout the novels moments like this are common, in which the characters of Beckett's previous work reappear (sometimes literally), often as a skewed reincarnation. Always they are invoked as failed attempts, as half finished, picked up in the form of the new protagonist of the current work. To say that the Beckettian archetype is an autobiographical creation is a step too far, and yet looking at this figure there is much from the author himself. Beginning with the clearest example in the Belaqua¹⁴¹ of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, right through to the barely recognisable voices who speak in *How It Is*, the figure invariably appropriates elements of Beckett the man. From Dublin,

141 Belaqua is of course a French variation on Beckett, and indeed may have been their original name as the family history traces back to Huguenot roots. Whether or not this is accurate, Beckett made no qualms about, and indeed many have studied in depth the loosely shrouded incidents and people from Beckett's own life that feature in *Dream*.

which often appears transformed, or a distant incorporeal memory, we still can recognise the city of Beckett's youth; the old masters whose work shaped and moulded the writer appear time and time again, in many obscure and sometimes even blatant references.

The notion that Beckett has a clearly definable goal behind his narrative choices is problematic. As we have examined earlier in the thesis, in *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett* John Calder argues the case that Beckett is a writer who has a distinct metaphysical perspective and further that 'what future generations can expect to find in his work is above all an ethical and philosophical message; the novels and plays will increasingly be seen as the wrapping for that message.'¹⁴² This idea of Beckett's purpose, of his work as a vehicle for an ethical, humanist or even philosophical sense, in the Western metaphysical tradition, is an understanding that is often outdated and a lot of the time simply wrong. Many have cited Beckett's influences as evidence of the aims his work takes. Throughout Beckett's oeuvre there are references made to the writers and thinkers who shaped his output. Within *Molloy* alone there are several references made to Cartesian thinking, the Christian philosopher Geulincx and of course one of Beckett's obsessions, *The Divine Comedy*. What is essential to understand with Beckett is that from his influences he did not merely produce work that was derivative, but engaged with them in a far more complex and ambiguous manner. This is of course the idea of Beckett as the bricoleur which was explored fully in the chapter on *Murphy*.

Beckett is enamoured with the work of these great religious thinkers and yet he was from a very young age an atheist. Littering his oeuvre are, as I have mentioned, references and homages paid to writers and works to which Beckett may owe a debt or enjoy but which he did not subscribe to in their entirety. Take Geulincx for example, whom we have already

¹⁴² John Calder, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder Publications, 2001), p. 1.

looked at in depth with regards *Murphy*. Molloy says

I who had loved the image of old Geulincx, dead young, who left me free, on the black boat of Ulysses, to crawl towards the East, along the deck. (MO, p. 132.)

This cryptic remark is typical of Molloy and although designed to puzzle, rather than enlighten, it does give us specificity as to the sources the book draws from. Again, the argument I would make is that this reappearance of Geulincx in a later work does not mean that we should search for the influence of the thinker in the aims of *Molloy*, but rather as part of the milieu of forces Beckett reacts to.

In a sense we can understand the majority of Beckett's influences in this way. As well as being invested in ideas of negation within his work, Beckett also seems to operate in a similar way with regard to his predecessors. The areas of disagreement with these important and defining figures in Beckett's development are where his most important ideas become apparent. With Descartes, it is very much in a similar vein to Geulincx; obsessed by the opening of *Discours de la méthode* (1637) and *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641) he basks in the proving of life's essentially unknowable character ('Dubito') and yet winces at the defining 'cogito ergo sum', a step Beckett would never be prepared to make. In *Molloy* this essential disparagement is brought out in various parodies of rationalism and attempts to bring logical solutions to ridiculous problems. This ranges from Molloy's multiple page discussion of the best method for alternating the sucking stones he regularly collects from beaches, through to Moran's attempts to resolve the finer points of theology towards the end of his narrative:

1. What value is to be attached to the theory that Eve sprang, not from Adam's rib, but from a tumour in the fat of his leg (arse)?
2. Did the serpent crawl or, as Comestor affirms, walk upright?
3. Did Mary conceive through the ear, as Augustine and Adobard assert?
4. How much longer are we to hang about waiting for the antichrist?... (MO, pp. 160-161.)

Rationalism and the various schools of thought Beckett studied at Trinity College, Dublin

appear, much like many of the events of his youth, under various guises throughout his prose output and yet are to be seen most effectively as part of a framework of things to engage with, and not to emulate. This is most strikingly true in the relationship Beckett had with Joyce, something I have already highlighted in the earlier quotation in which the former categorises one of the most formative events of his writing career as his decision to attempt the opposite of Joyce.

What then are we to understand as the character of Beckett's writing at this point? Is it an essentially hopeless affair as some have said; a nihilistic enterprise intended for nothing more than the reduction of prose and the rejection of its ideas until nothing is left? In a sense this is true, although to think of a novel like *Molloy* in such pessimistic terms rests uncomfortably with an attentive reading of the work. It is far more accurate to say of Beckett's prose that it has a duality of purpose: it seeks to contain a set of shifting ideas (characterised by the similarities in their nature) whilst simultaneously functioning as an enactment of these ideas. In a 1989 interview he gave to Derek Attridge, Jacques Derrida was questioned on why he had not written on Samuel Beckett, a writer whom many felt had affinities with the philosopher. Derrida now famously, or infamously depending on your perspective, stated that he could deconstruct Joyce from a mere two words (as he of course did in his essay 'Two Words for Joyce'), but that to try and attempt the same thing with Beckett would be impossible. Derrida noted that he could take a work like *Ulysses* and from a single line he could deconstruct the entire novel, revealing previously held truths about it to in fact be erroneous. Beckett, and in particular Beckett after he began to write in French, was a writer for whom this kind of treatment was simply not appropriate. For one thing Derrida says that Beckett has his own French, a branch of a language he has created which would require an entirely new set of criteria to approach adequately.

Attridge asks Derrida if the problem with trying to deconstruct Beckett's work is that it actually deconstructs itself, to which Derrida answers in the affirmative.¹⁴³ This is actually in keeping with what many have argued in recent years, with some casting Beckett and Derrida as proponents of the same philosophical school, although using different types of writing. I, however, will not attempt to argue for this kind of understanding. Although in many respects Beckett is a poststructuralist writer, and indeed a prescient one at that, it is to reshape his work for one's own purposes to suggest at this stage he can be aligned with a single school of philosophical thought, even one as disparate and undermining of Western philosophy as deconstruction.

Beckett's prose, much like the work of Derrida, is a body that is by its very nature an attempt to unshackle itself from the incumbent restrictions applied by the tradition into which it falls. Both however, are also aware of the impossibility of moving outside one's culture and the consequent prescription incurred by working within a set of recurring modes. It could be argued the best way to think of *Molloy* then is as a novel fundamentally concerned with truth, in the sense of casting what is accepted theologically, philosophically and linguistically as essentially based on flawed principles and in need of revision. Beckett's project is at every stage an attempt to undermine and dislocate the foundations upon which prescribed structures of various kinds sit. Take the form of narration within the novel, which we have just examined; it operates through the character of Molloy as a highly eloquent way to represent the futility of language. More than the gibbering fool he appears upon first examination he is also illustrative of the failures of communication, of its loose ends and shifting meanings. This can be seen in the way his narrative is written, with the sprawling sentences qualified until almost senseless. The impression that is given is that of a world in which everything is open to question. The most basic statements need

143 Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 61.

to be drawn out, turned on their head, revealed as hollow and then stated anyway for us to understand just what is at stake. In this way *Molloy* is an attack on intelligibility; its purpose, not to show the reader an alternate reality in which meaning is suspect, beginning with language and expanding out into understanding as a whole. Rather, it is to say this is in fact the world we currently occupy, an exaggerated and explicit mirror image of our relationship with language, thought, understanding and communication. The difference with a character like Molloy is that he has, to a greater extent than most of us would allow, given himself over to the truth that understandability itself is not even an approximation of reality, but in opposition to it. Indeed, Beckett's characters in *Molloy* are, in a very strange, illustrative manner, some of the most didactic to be found in his oeuvre.

This is reflected in the evaporating differences we witness between Molloy and Moran as the novel progresses. As we have discussed Moran's narration is something that moves from its relatively straightforward format at the beginning of his half of the novel, into something with far more ambiguity, encompassing elongated sentences, fractures in thought and the same series of qualifications we found with Molloy. Indeed, the convergence of the two men towards the end of the narrative highlights Beckett's position within the book. Reflected in his understanding of the world as a cohesive and approachable entity the highly structured and simplistic narrative opens up as Moran's consciousness dawns upon the truth that existence is in fact a complex, fractured thing, constantly dislocating its meaning and shifting under our gaze. By the end of the novel we have a bizarre situation where we are actually unsure if Molloy and Moran can be understood as separate entities. They have become so similar and the incidents surrounding their relationship are open enough to suggest that everything we have assumed is in fact unstable. This is of course the precise effect Beckett is attempting to create and

Maurice Blanchot may have illustrated what happens best when he said

Moran, without knowing it, becomes Molloy, that is becomes an entirely different character, a metamorphosis which undermines the security of the narrative element and simultaneously introduces an allegorical sense, perhaps a disappointing one for we do not feel it is adequate to the depths concealed here.¹⁴⁴

Blanchot's writings on Beckett are admirable not just for their attempts to formalize Beckett when so many have faltered in the face of the texts' apparent resistance, but also for the clarity with which he presents the complex issues in the writing. We can see this reflected in the idea of suggestion the quotation brings out. What Blanchot is saying is that *Molloy* purports to offer all the prerequisites necessary to infer what is actually being stated; to read the subtext and divine the "true" meaning of the text. However, in practice what it actually does is offer a series of dead ends. Perhaps more appropriately we could think of understanding the text in the conventional manner as being given glimpses of a truth that when approached reveals itself as wholly insubstantial. When Blanchot says that what Beckett does is to tantalize us with 'an allegorical sense' he encompasses not just this one example but in fact a central mode of *Molloy*. The promise of an allegorical end one can take from the text and understand is there only in form. In *Saying I No More* Daniel Katz comments that

In fact, the widespread critical attempts to arrange the two narratives of *Molloy* into some sort of chronological order seem to be a displacement of the problem, as within a hermeneutic logic of interpretation, the repetitions between the two narratives would lead less to the conclusion that we are dealing with two sets of events, who similarities consist in that they "happened to" and are recounted by the "same person," than that we are dealing with the *same* events, recounted from two different perspectives.¹⁴⁵

However, I would argue that in this case even Katz's assertion these are the same events is a further example of the displacement he cites. Of the many possibilities of the "true" nature of the Molloy-Moran relationship each is in fact a chimera; all the signs are offered for the reader to fully understand and therefore master the text, yet when they try to do so

¹⁴⁴ *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. by Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 95.

¹⁴⁵ Daniel Katz, *Saying "I" No More* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 74.

they are led instead to a series of possibilities, all of which have equal weighting and are in fact intentionally without resolution. This point is neatly summarised in the Longman Critical Readers volume on Samuel Beckett,

A critical discourse with pretensions to master the text, to assimilate it to its own preoccupations, will find on engaging with Beckett's textuality that it cannot be master, and is itself 'held' (and at least partially assimilated) by the work it aimed to hold.¹⁴⁶

As before the purpose is one of negation and subversion. Playing upon what one can and should expect from the novel Beckett offers the possibility of full understanding, only to refuse it at every juncture. This is a process of undermining not just reader expectation but the fundamental metaphysical base upon which Western literature sits. Again we look to the aforementioned illusions often assumed about Beckett's relationship with his predecessors: many have cast him as far more of a Cartesian writer than he was and subsequently have come to conclusions on the precise nature of the Molloy-Moran question that are simply not justified.

Paradoxically, *Molloy* aims for a *lack* of finality, for methods which will best illustrate the ragged, unfinished nature of understanding. Just as there is no actual answer to the Molloy-Moran question there is no further answer to the structural basis upon which this understanding sits. *Molloy* appears distinctly poststructuralist in this regard; the unresolved nature of the two protagonists sits alongside the form of the narration as analogous of the faltering relationship of signifier and signified. What may appear strange then is that Beckett is a writer who deals with serious issues at the bedrock of understanding and existence and yet chooses to do so by a process of mocking, undermining and absurdism. Beckett is often cast as a morbid figure, obsessed solely with negativity and death; the next aspect of the novel I wish to look at shows a writer in stark

¹⁴⁶ Jennifer Birkett and Kate Ince, *Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Jennifer Birkett and Kate Ince (London: Longman, 2000), p. 28.

opposition to this.

Destabilising Genre

The title of “serious author”, often assigned to Beckett is in fact a misnomer, at least in terms of the actual presentation of his work. In the media the author’s works can too often be portrayed in a very sombre manner, no doubt encouraged by popular culture’s tendency to oversimplify and label. James Joyce once remarked that for all the acclaim, controversy and attention that *Ulysses* garnered he wished that once someone would mention how funny it was. Whether or not one agrees with Joyce’s assessment of his masterpiece, it is a grave mistake to think of a novel like *Molloy* as a dour affair. The reason for this is that black humour is not merely part of the milieu of Beckett’s work; it is in fact central and functions in a very specific way, communicating an absurdist vision contributing to the end previously discussed. There is for example a moment when Molloy is on his bicycle, riding at top speed with his one bad leg perched on top of the handlebars as he rides into town. The incident is related as follows:

But to tell the truth (to tell the truth!) I have never been particularly resolute, I mean given to resolutions, but rather inclined to plunge headlong into the shit, without knowing who was shitting against whom or on which side I had the better chance of skulking with success. But from this leaning too I derived scant satisfaction and if I have never quite got rid of it it is not for want of trying. The fact is, it seems, that the most you can hope is to be a little less, in the end, the creature you were in the beginning, in the middle. For I had hardly perfected my plan, in my head, when my bicycle ran over a dog, as subsequently appeared, and fell to the ground, an ineptness all the more unpardonable as the dog, duly leashed, was not out on the road, but in on the pavement, docile at its mistress’s heels. (MO, p. 28.)

Recounted at the fervent pace Molloy is exclusively capable of, the moment when the bearded, scrawny old man, the dead dog and the bicycle are caught up together and possibly all airborne is pure farce. This is especially true when we consider Molloy has only just related how he mustn’t try to think whilst he rides his bicycle as this leads to accidents. Beckett is a writer who deals with the most challenging of questions, but as

previously stated he does so by invoking a spirit of ridiculousness. If *Molloy* is an extended discussion of existence itself what are we told by the choice to make the two protagonists fools of differing sorts? Some of Moran's most ridiculous moments come from his interactions with his son before and during their journey. Often cruel and strange his dedication to maintaining his self-image as the model citizen and father makes the set of rules he tries to live by seem frivolous and absurd. When, for example he is going to great lengths to explain to his son how to purchase a bike, he states

Stop trying to understand, I said, just listen to what I am going to say, because I shall not say it twice. He came over to me and knelt down. You would have thought I was about to breathe my last. Do you know what a new bicycle is? I said. Yes papa, he said. Very well, I said, if you can't find a second-hand bicycle buy a new bicycle. I repeat. I repeated. I who said I would not repeat. Now tell me what you are to do, I said. I added, Take your face away, your breath stinks. (MO, p. 137.)

From incidents like this through to the more specifically parodic scenes of Molloy distributing and redistributing his sucking stones, the novel remains throughout a work which engages in philosophical critique whilst simultaneously undermining and subverting the seriousness of these things. The end is again, not a clear and definitive statement but rather a reflection of an outlook which is fundamentally skeptical about our apprehension of the world. As in the example above, the comedy arises from the abruptness and unexpected nature of what occurs. Events that are in fact relatively innocuous in themselves, are combined and presented just slightly off-kilter to serve as a subversive tool. In this way *Molloy* is, as has been noted in previous chapters, very similar to the novels of Kafka, which equally present us with worlds highly recognizable, yet unreal enough to imbue the work with a critique of the established structures of society. Beckett is even broader, showing that the basic principles of structure, from language and expanding outwards into our interactions with every facet of the world are not the fixed and knowable things we assume, but rather a fractured and imperfect set of compromises for the failures in pure understanding. This is what Beckett's comedy seeks to bring out

and this is one of the key things *Molloy* does on a philosophical level.

The aforementioned abruptness in the text is one of its hallmarks. It pervades the sentences of the work leaving the reader with a taste of unfinished ideas. Even this sense is an unstable mode however as, despite the bleakly comic nature of the work, we do not expect the more domestic scenes and often are quite shocked by them. Nowhere is this truer than in the scenes of violence which often erupt without notice. Toward the end of Molloy's half of the novel he is approached in the forest by a charcoal burner, a man who attempts to keep him there for unknown purposes. Sensing the impediment to the search for his mother the usually amiable Molloy promptly bludgeons the burner with his crutches, before taking his time to line up, swing on them and kick the man in both his back and ribs. Perhaps what is so unsettling about this incident is the fact it is told in much the same manner as any of the other trivial and light-hearted events. Molloy as usual is a stickler for method and rationality, taking his time and describing the ingenious method he has found for quite possibly killing this man. He notes,

So I smartly freed a crutch and dealt him a good dint on the skull. That calmed him. The dirty old brute. I got up and went on. But I hadn't gone more than a few paces, and for me at this time a few paces meant something, when I turned and went back to where he lay, to examine him. Seeing he had not ceased to breathe I contented myself with giving him a few kicks in the ribs, with my heels. This is how I went about it. I carefully chose the most favourable position, a few paces from the body, with my back of course turned to it. Then, nicely balanced on my crutches, I began to swing, backwards, forwards, feet pressed together, or rather legs pressed together, for how could I press my feet together, with my legs in the state they were? I pressed them together, that's all I can tell you. Take it or leave it. Or I didn't press them together. What could that possibly matter? I swung, that's all that matters, in an ever-widening arc, until I decided the moment had come and launched myself forward with all my strength and consequently, a moment later, backward, which gave the desired result. ^(MO, pp. 78-79.)

The proximity of this violence to comedic moments unsettles our understanding of the kind of story we are being told and presents another of Beckett's methods for breaking out of the confines dictated by prescriptive assumption.

Similar to this is the way the relationship between Moran and his son is described. Together they form the typically Beckettian double-act; the aforementioned “TWO” Badiou describes. Badiou noted that

This is the question that ultimately ties together all of Beckett’s work. Is an effective Two possible, a Two that would be in excess of solipsism? We might also say that this is the question of love.¹⁴⁷

If *Molloy* is to a limited extent representative of Beckett, if he is various exaggerations of his personality and embodiments of his ideas, and furthermore if Moran and Jacques are as Badiou says the hopes for an existence lived with another what does the novel tell us? The relationship between son and father is similar to *Molloy*’s story in that it is often comic and yet undercut by moments of violence. There is something of the silent film era about Moran and Jacques; a Laurel and Hardy quality, with the blind leading the blind, that Beckett is of course aware of. One only needs look at his choice to cast Buster Keaton in *Film* (1965) to know Beckett saw his characters as at least partly slapstick creations. So, it comes as a shock then that episodes like Moran sending his son to buy a bicycle (and throwing his shoe at him in frustration) are placed alongside the murder of the stranger, or the abandonment of Moran by his son. This is common to all Beckettian twos: often mingled in with elements of comedy is a mean, violent or unexplained streak that undermines reader expectation and unsettles the comfort of the relationship we see echoed from popular culture.

In *Molloy* event and action are only ever present in the text as something to be undermined, mocked and parodied. In fact alongside the rest of Beckett’s work *Molloy* is a text heavy with plot, or perhaps more appropriately with all the method and semblance of plot. The central event of Moran’s tale is the search for *Molloy*, or at least it should be, but as has

¹⁴⁷ Badiou, p. 5.

been discussed this is something which Beckett sets up and then makes no effort to fulfill. A disproportionately large amount of the text is used to describe the seemingly trivial exposition of Moran preparing to leave his home, whilst the journey itself is only embarked upon with seemingly arbitrary direction. This is what Pilling sees as another of Beckett's tools in his overall destabilizing of primarily literature, but also of assumptions about language, philosophy and knowledge. He achieves this most often by presenting us with something familiar, with the appearance of familiarity, quickly revealed to play no part in the system we assumed it had. This is true of the violence in the book, a serious issue that is made to shift out of its usual status by virtue of its apparently arbitrary nature and the lack of consequences that arise from its appearance.

This imperative is present in every choice Beckett makes in the novel. In terms of its genre it is often closest to the detective novels the author would read for fun. Firstly, we have Molloy's searching for his mother, and then of course the more overtly genre-specific episode in which Moran is sent to find Molloy. Again however, the genre only features in fragments and when it does appear it is only as a husk, which is parodied by the action of the story. Take for example Moran, who belongs to an agency and has as his job the task of finding and dealing with various people. With the Molloy case he is firstly unsure even of the name of the man he is supposed to find (considering that it may in fact be "Mollose" who he is supposed to be in pursuit of), he then realizes that he has no idea what he is supposed to do with Molloy once he has found him and pursues his target by following a seemingly random selection of impulses. What using the detective genre does however is to open up a series of questions about the possibility of knowledge, a play around fulfillment of the work's responsibilities insofar as it falls within its specific genre, and a thorough disavowal of answers that may be forthcoming.

In Search of Lost Time

Time is another aspect of literature Beckett is keen to infuse with a sense of play. I spoke of his monograph on Proust previously and reading that one gets a sense of the depths to which Beckett's thinking on time within and beyond the novel stretched. In *Molloy* time is the backdrop against which Beckett's various invokings, parodies and states of play are set. It is both another issue the novel seeks to address, as well as being an extra equation that shifts and alters the previously discussed devices at work. In *Repetition, Theory and Text* (1988) Steven Connor argues that whilst nearly all have understood the book as a move towards the minimal, how we should actually see it is as the turning point towards an 'ever more intense awareness of the predicament of immanence.'¹⁴⁸ To a certain extent I find this statement very appealing as a way to understand Beckett. In *Molloy* more so than any of the previous work time is treated as fluid, and not merely affected by our perception of it, thinking along the lines of Proust's "involuntary memory". Rather time itself is questionable because of its supposedly fixed and permanent position, an abstraction Beckett could never accept. This is why in *Molloy* the entire timeframe of the narrative is presented as upon a shifting plateau, where events that one thought happened along a certain period are revealed as having happened completely differently, or most often as perhaps having not happened at all. Looking at the novel in its broadest sense, we are never given any except the most questionable and incidental indicators of what year the story takes place in. We can piece together from the idiom of the characters, the domesticity and diet of Moran and the common availability of the bicycle that the story probably takes place in the twentieth century. This said, even these markers are made to seem spurious with everything in the novel surrounded by an almost fantastical air, serving to distort the definition we seek to find within the work.

¹⁴⁸ Stephen Connor, *Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 45.

Connor's definition is so apposite as what actually happens within the borders of the book is that the present becomes the dominant mode, despite the fact both parts of the novel are reminiscences. Molloy is a character who throughout is determined by a tunnel vision which refuses him access to a greater perspective and see the past and future. He lives entirely for his present state in which he must find his mother, although how to achieve this and what he intends to do upon finding his mother seems to be irrelevant. His past is filled with incidents that may or may not have happened, names of people often reduced to the two or three most likely possibilities and the means by which he reached his present state completely unexplained. Even this present state is seemingly ever-changing in terms of the observance of time. There are occasions when Molloy will say that he has been somewhere for only a couple of days, to then reveal that it may in fact be weeks he is thinking of as he has been judging the passing of time by casual glances towards the moon.

Time for Moran on the other hand, at the start of his story, is a fixed and permanent thing he holds himself to and takes great pride in observing. He is a regimented individual who has a schedule heavily involved with the church, diet and his other responsibilities towards his son. It is only after he has departed his home and his world starts to change that time takes on an altogether different character. A large part of Moran's disintegration once he has become stranded in the forest is the slipping of his supposed perceptions of time. Especially at such times as when his son goes to buy a bicycle and Moran is left alone, his sense of things passing becomes far more like that of Molloy: dependent on events and impulses to signal the movement of time as opposed to strict observance. The collapse of Moran's world is also his discovery that the things he assumed to be true, fixed and immovable, now appear to him as hollow, surface fantasies. As I have said, towards the

end his character becomes a mirror image of Molloy's, with far more abstract concepts he had taken for granted brought under inspection. Beckett therefore presents us firstly with a protagonist in *Molloy* we assume to be insane by virtue of his often confused and seemingly meaningless relationships with society, action, language, memory and time. By the end of the novel however we find that the systems that Moran used to control and understand these phenomena fall apart around him. He is left by the seemingly arbitrary series of events that lead him to his final return home to confront the fact that everything he relied upon was at the very best an approximation of reality and often outright false. Again in this sense *Molloy* is Beckett's most didactic piece of work. Not only does it explore the areas of absence and ambiguity around his core set of issues, it in fact provides the alternative to this way of thinking; a man convinced of the solid foundations upon which he lives his life is shown to be in fact just as much at the whim of the random forces that truly control the world. John Pilling notes that as the characters come to be defined by this state of eternally being in the present, they are in a kind of purgatory. He contends that Beckett differs from his master Dante in that whereas the latter had the "triadic vision" hell, purgatory and paradise Beckett would never follow Dante into the final stage. Beckett's characters live and breathe the purgatory of life itself and are trapped in time, returning to various points, truly unaware of its exact nature and unable to move outside its limits.¹⁴⁹

Language

Although we have already spoken of the central role the narrative choices Beckett makes play in our understanding of his philosophical position, what we haven't looked at in detail is the language itself Beckett chooses to use. In the introduction to volume II of *The Grove Centenary Edition* of Beckett's work Salman Rushdie says of Beckett's language that

149 John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 30.

A man speaking English beautifully chooses to speak in French, which he speaks with greater difficulty, so that he is obliged to choose his words carefully, forced to give up fluency and to find the hard words that come with difficulty, and then after all that finding he puts it all back into English, a new English containing all the difficulty of the French, of the coining of thought in a second language... (MO, p. xiv.)

Beckett once said of English that one of his major problems with it, or the reason he chose to write in French, was that he was always far too tempted to write poetry.¹⁵⁰ The subject matter of Beckett's later works especially is often despair, poverty and these works usually feature a protagonist who is some kind of confused vagrant. Without going into the philosophical reasons, these basic demands of subject make it easy to see why he would wish to find a method to mirror his content. With French, a language for him that had fewer of the associations a first language brings, he could begin again and forge a language empty of sentiment or specificity. Once he had used his new tools and the novel was written in French it made it possible to translate the work back into English, retaining much of what was in the French version. Beckett wanted his novels to be written in as plain and unencumbered a language as possible.

Although Molloy's speech is full of details and he is keen to describe the action, what he actually does is to present the reader with a lot of information that is not retained in the normal way but serves instead as an impression. Deleuze says:

Let us call this atomistic, disjunctive, cut and chopped language in Beckett *language I*, a language in which enumeration replaces propositions and combinatorial relations replace syntactic relations: a language of names.¹⁵¹

So sheer volume of information, words upon words that often repeat or add to what has already been said, and that are sometimes deliberately obscure are the language of the novel. It is the combinatorial relations of sentences, which we have looked at previously, that allow for the sprawling impressionistic imprint. Despite the aim of the language to be

¹⁵⁰ Knowlson, p. 134.

¹⁵¹ Deleuze, p. 156.

a vehicle and an unobtrusive force in Beckett's writing, it can also be somewhat conspicuous by virtue of this. Pilling notes:

In Beckett such vocabulary does two things: it calls attention to itself (this is especially true in a work like *How It Is* where the majority of the work is rather bare and formulaic) and hence mocks itself; but it also makes a specialised, scientifically accurate language seem momentarily possible. As a result, the first mock is often succeeded by a drier, more despairing mock, a risus purus indeed.¹⁵²

If Badiou is right in that Beckett has been miscast as a negative writer, then Pilling's suggestion that Beckett not only offers his language in a metafictional, self-referential manner, but also that he offers the possibility of a language that may succeed where others fail, then this is only ironically given as a possibility. It is in the same way the other avenues of logic, philosophy and religion are also given, because of the impossibility of their truth. Beckett's work approaches these issues not by way of condemnation or leading by example, but rather by hinting at an alternative possibility, only to offer it up as another sacrifice to the purgatorial state of pure ambivalence with which we perceive the world.

In the work *Ecce Homo* (1888), which Friedrich Nietzsche wrote shortly before losing his mind, the writer looked back over his oeuvre and settled upon this as one of his principal realisations and achievements:

'Moral man is no closer to the intelligible world than physical man – *for* there is no intelligible world...' This proposition, hardened and sharpened beneath the hammer-blow of historical knowledge (lisez: Revaluation of All Values), may perhaps at some future time – 1890! – serve as the axe which is laid at the root of the 'metaphysical need' of man – whether more of a blessing or a curse to mankind who can say?¹⁵³

Beckett was in no doubt as to whether the metaphysical need of man was a good or bad thing. *Molloy* is a work aimed directly at the opening statement Nietzsche makes; it plays and toys with intelligibility and yet on closer inspection its methods are deceptive, for it is also the axe swiping at the roots. In a time before consciousness was focused so sharply on

¹⁵² Pilling, p. 49-50.

¹⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 64.

Beckett as a “philosophical writer” John Pilling noted that with *The Trilogy* there is an awareness that

Aporia pure and simple, as the Unnameable realizes, runs the risk of tedium; even the second possibility he entertains, ‘affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered’, fail, and when they fail, ‘other shifts’ must be tried, approaches of greater sensitivity. All, however (as the word ‘shifts’ suggests), involve jolting us out of our usual quotidian certainties and complacencies; and constantly trying other ways of solving the problems.¹⁵⁴

Can we see *Molloy* then as a high water mark of a particular set of approaches to the problems Beckett had been dealing with since the earliest works of his career? It is not only this, but in fact an entirely new type of writing which blurs the lines of understanding between generic classification. As I have said, this is not a deconstructionist text per se or a wrapping of philosophy in fiction as John Calder conceives it. It is a work of art; a comedy in fact, that is also an enactment of a philosophical reaction. The duality of past/present narrative Molloy and Moran recount, the writing back to and against the Western metaphysical tradition and most importantly the incessant erosion of language expanding out into structure are all an enactment. An enactment of several distinct, yet intertwined and recurring poststructuralist moments that attempt a pulling open of the shutters obscuring our possible observance of true understanding. In this sense *Molloy* is one of the most successful works Beckett wrote. The methods we have seen him reworking over and over in previous chapters are as harmonious as they ever would be in offering this defogging of the glass. In the next two chapters we shall examine if Beckett's work was capable of evolution past this point, if it would dare offer replacement answers to the problems it has thus far highlighted.

¹⁵⁴ Pilling, p. 28.

Chapter Five:

Overcoming an Impasse in *Malone Dies*?

In the last chapter we concluded that *Molloy* was, in certain respects, the endpoint of an evolutionary process begun with *Murphy* and accelerated through the immediate postwar work. Here we found Beckett reaching a plateau in terms of his evolving symbioses of form and content. This marriage offered the clearest capturing of the various ideas¹⁵⁵ the works had offered in response to his selected history of philosophy and literature. The question that therefore needs to be asked at this juncture is: if *Molloy* operates within an enacting, illustrative mode working at an incessant destabilisation of our implicit acceptance of metaphysics and wider, its logocentric tools, what can subsequent work achieve? The first thing to note is that this period clearly didn't feel like an impasse for Beckett, as he completed his Trilogy in relatively quick succession, part of the 'frenzy of writing' James Knowlson identifies.¹⁵⁶ In previous chapters I have tried to show how *Molloy* and its predecessors built toward and refined an operation that could be described as defogging the glass of false understanding; a methodology that did not seek to affirm its own thesis, but instead worked always as a "reveal" or critique. Are we to see *Malone Dies* as a continuation of this method? Or, alternatively, does this work differ from what has come before and offer a solution or replacement to the metaphysical problems Beckett repeatedly identifies?

It is quickly apparent upon even a cursory glance at *The Unnamable* that this final work of The Trilogy has shifted significantly in presentation from *Molloy*. In discussing these works it is understanding this gulf that many critics have been preoccupied with. A result

¹⁵⁵ I of course refer here to the concerns that announce themselves most clearly in the 1946 novellas, before being reworked in the subsequent novels. These include, but are not limited to, bodily decay, exile, love, life as purgatory and of course death.

¹⁵⁶ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 358.

is that *Malone Dies* is often approached as a bridging work, significant to a degree in itself, but much more so for what it reveals about the two novels that bookend it. It is difficult to identify this as a trend, to cite examples of an absence in appreciation. Beckett studies has not ignored *Malone Dies* in its entirety, but it is often marginalised in critical works that purport to deal with The Trilogy as a whole. We can see this in significant texts in the history of Beckett criticism, such as Maurice Blanchot's essay 'Where now? Who Now?' which deals most heavily with *The Unnamable*. In this case it is the focus on the last work and its ability to so clearly transcend the limitations of its status as a novel which relegates *Malone Dies* to a periphery significance. We can find further examples of this marginalisation, including Michael Robinson's book *The Long Sonata of the Dead* in which he notes '*Molloy* is still literature, a consciously written description of an extreme situation; *The Unnamable*, in its gasping, breathless anguish, has ceased to pretend.'¹⁵⁷ The semicolon that splits the descriptions of the works is the space *Malone Dies* will often find itself pushed into: a strange middle ground between the harnessing of a response to philosophy as part of a recognisable prose offering in *Molloy* and the more overt experimentation of *The Unnamable*.

In truth, one can see why critics have found it difficult to approach the work in its own right. Thematically it deals with many of the same concerns we find in *Molloy* and the 1946 novellas. Again, it is death, the body, communication, ageing and the issues which splinter from these with which the novel concerns itself. The result, when examining the place of the work within Beckett's oeuvre as a whole is a difficulty in finding new areas of discussion. To a large degree these issues are treated in much the same way and again work toward the collective purpose of demonstrating limitations in our understanding. Yet, despite this, it is the intention of this chapter to return to these themes. It would of course

¹⁵⁷ Michael Robinson, *The Long Sonata of the Dead* (London: Hart-Davis, 1969), p. 140.

be a futile exercise to try and discuss their effects if they are treated in largely the same manner. The idea will therefore be to examine certain key areas that differ from what has come before and augment our understanding. Furthermore, they will all be discussed as fundamentally altered by a significant new focus. Throughout the novel there is an attention to the process of narrative and storytelling which, although featured before, becomes an ever-present theme, branching out into and augmenting the way we apprehend the book's other concerns. Narrative in *Malone Dies* becomes a sort of lens through which we examine these aforementioned established Beckettian themes and it is the aim of this chapter to reassess the importance of the work based on this.

The novel opens on Malone in his institutional deathbed outlining what he plans to do with his remaining time. He says 'Whilst waiting [for death] I shall tell myself stories, if I can. They will not be the same kind of stories as hitherto, that is all. They will be neither beautiful nor ugly, they will be calm, there will be no ugliness or beauty in them any more, they will be almost lifeless, like the teller.' (MD, p. 174.) Firstly, this quotation is somewhat loaded in terms of the implications for the baser, "ugly" elements we find in the stories, but this is something we shall return to later. Important for our purposes is that, from the very outset, this is a novel concerned with stories and the process of storytelling. After mulling the division of his remaining time and therefore the progress of the novel Malone concludes he has five narrative objectives: 'To return to the five. Present state, three stories, inventory, there.' (MD, p. 176.) This is the running order he establishes, but from the outset the progress of his document, the document that is the novel, will undermine this order. His present state and inventory will not just occupy the beginning and end of the story, but will weave in and out of the novel in the form of digressions to the tales he tells. Furthermore, the stories he actually tells bear little resemblance to the descriptions he

assigns them, or rather the descriptions are so broad the stories may feature the non-specific things he chooses to define them with. His plan is 'each one on a different theme. One about a man, another about a woman, a third about a thing and finally one about an animal, a bird probably.' (MD, p. 174.)

In contrast to this claim Malone will offer episodes from the narratives of Sapo (boyhood) and Macmann (adulthood). The aforementioned interjections of Malone into these stories provide a third narrative in of itself. The interrelated Beckettian tropes of physicality, death and intratextuality are here augmented by the new focus on narrative and set *Malone Dies* apart from previous work. This is achieved throughout in two ways. Firstly, there is the frequent commentary Malone provides on the stories as he relates them. These arrest their progress, bringing their artificial nature to the fore in a manner inescapable for the reader. Often he will express a disgusted restlessness with what he is doing and question the structure of the narrative, as in the following example: 'What tedium. If I went on to the stone? No, it would be the same thing. The Lamberts, the Lamberts, does it matter about the Lamberts? No, not particularly.' (MD, p. 210.)

It would be wrong to say the Lamberts are a family Sapo befriends, because their relationship is very much one of mutual tolerance and a strange proxy affection. Perhaps it is more accurate to say he spends time in their household in order to escape his own. The above quotation is typical of the scorn poured over the story being told and the persistent attempts to reveal its inner workings and artificiality. Like so much in Beckett the effect of this is suggestive in a manner akin to ripples moving from the centre of a break in water. The implications are foremost a questioning of narrative process, which is in turn a questioning of language (its tool) and taken in the context of Beckett's oeuvre a questioning

of affirmation generally. This illustrative approach is something covered in previous chapters; the repercussions of a seemingly isolated and indeed trivial moment fracture and destabilize along a fault line.

The second kind of interruption Malone provides focuses more on the content of his stories and comes in the form of interjections that brazenly question the purpose and effectiveness of the illustrative process we have just discussed. This kind of self-examination built into the fabric of the text is something we have seen fleetingly in previous works, but in *Malone Dies* assumes a new prominence with Malone acting as critic of his unfolding narrative:

All is pretext, Sapo and the birds, Moll, the peasants, those who in the tower seek one another out and fly from one another, my doubts which do not interest me, my situation, my possessions, pre-text for not coming to the point, the abandoning, the raising of the arms and going down, without further splash, even though it may annoy the bathers. ^(MD, p. 270.)

This accusation of pretext is a criticism, not just of Sapo's story or *Malone Dies*, but of Beckett's work in its entirety up to that point. The image of those in the tower searching for one another, yet simultaneously moving apart is inserted amongst the various other examples more directly from the novel and shifts the criticism into the larger context of Beckett's work as a whole. We can see this image as representative of the desire to understand fully, inevitably undermined by the very desire to understand upon the logocentric, metaphysical basis the works subvert. It is typical of a new restlessness with the established patterns of the novels up to this point and the call to abandon these methods, relinquish attempts at control and occupy a moment of resignation. The imagery is particularly striking, encompassing as it does death, birth, a swimming baths. Perhaps we can read this last clause on annoying the bathers as a commentary on the inevitable resistance one no doubt faces in a focus on hopelessness and acceptance of the

unknowability of our situation, without reprieve. It certainly is prescient of those who would come to criticise Beckett as an essentially nihilist writer, claiming this “abandoning” as his essential characteristic. However, this will not be the claim offered here. I intend to argue that this questioning of Beckett's methodology and acceptance of abandoning, as he puts it, is another part of the fabric of the novel and not its final position. Alain Badiou wrote that 'Contrary to popular opinion, I think that Beckett's trajectory is one that begins with a blind belief in predestination and is then directed towards the examination of the possible conditions, be they aleatory or minimal, of a kind of freedom.'¹⁵⁸ The rest of this chapter will attempt to demonstrate how *Malone Dies*, using typically Beckettian themes achieves this.

Death as a Form of Birth

Looking again at the last line of the previously cited quotation, 'the raising of the arms and going down, without further splash, even though it may annoy the bathers' (MD, p. 270.), this image suggesting both death and a kind of birth is not as singular as one may assume. In the previous two chapters we have seen that death, by this point in Beckett's career, has become a central, recurring issue. His geriatric protagonists of the post-war work are riddled with signs of their impending end and those of the 1946 novellas in particular often question whether they may already have died and be living through some sort of damned afterlife. This is shifted to the background somewhat in *Molloy* but again becomes a recurring theme in *Malone Dies* as we can see from the following examples,

The truth is, if I did not feel myself dying, I could well believe myself dead, expiating my sins, or in one of heaven's mansions. (MD, p. 177.)

I would not watch myself die, that would spoil everything. (MD, p. 174.)

There is naturally another possibility that does not escape me, though it would be a great disappointment to have it confirmed, and that is that I am dead already and that all

¹⁵⁸ Alain Badiou, *On Beckett* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), p. 55.

continues more or less as when I was not. Perhaps I expired in the forest, or even earlier[...] But my horse-sense tells me I have not yet quite ceased to gasp. And it summons in support of this view various considerations having to do for example with the little heap of my possessions, my system of nutrition and elimination, the couple across the way, the changing sky, and so on. Whereas in reality all that is perhaps nothing but worms. (MD, p. 213.)

These speculations recall the ambiguity over the state of living the character occupies that we have seen in previous work, as well as being examples of the second type of narrative interjection just outlined. The title of the novel alone lets us know its primary concern, but examples such as these stress a questioning in terms of placing the time of Malone's death within the novel. We assume the title means the novel will cover the events leading up to Malone's death and it ostensibly confirms this. However, these suggestions Malone may already be dead, even if refuted, offer a level of doubt and a re-examination of his testimony. Perhaps the most tempting interpretation at this point is a symbolic reading like those attempted in previous chapters, in which one could argue Malone occupies a purgatorial state, doomed to endlessly recall the three major parts of his life in the form of these stories. John Murphy and John Pilling argue for this in their respective interpretations, with the latter commenting

And if the only paradise is the paradise that has been lost (as Beckett says in *Proust*), so that it is only time and not paradise that can be regained (Proust's vision rather than Milton's), then the triadic vision of Dante that so appealed to Beckett (hell, purgatory, paradise) has to be replaced by a kind of monadic condition which, for Beckett, is purgatorial.¹⁵⁹

Whilst there is certainly a great deal of validity in this kind of approach, I think *Malone Dies* offers something further on death. The stories of Sapo and Macmann are flaunted as artificial and created time and time again, but here the greater level of authenticity we may ascribe to Malone's account of his last days on his deathbed is also brought into question. The effect is to lift all narrative layers within the novel off a stable hierarchical base of

159 John Murphy, 'Beckett's Purgatories', *European Joyce Studies*, Iss. 16 (2005)

<http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqi:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:abell:R04162688:0> [accessed 30 December 2011] John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 30.

relative truth. That is to say the truth of the stories Malone is telling us, the truth of his own story and his authority as a reliable narrator and wider the possible truth of any kind of narrative. This is a kind of “play” which the novel mentions explicitly on a few occasions, specifically in the context of narrative or storytelling. In the following example Malone is describing what he is actually achieving in relating Sapo's story. He says 'And I call that playing. I wonder if I am not talking yet again about myself. Shall I be incapable, to the end, of lying on any other subject?' (MD, p. 183.) We can see throughout *Malone Dies* this kind of attitude towards the multiple narratives. The suggestion that with the story of Sapo he is actually describing aspects of his own life we have already discussed, but for Malone himself to call it a form of play is a progression in terms of Beckett's prose generally. So powerfully do these works suggest a prescience in describing and using poststructuralist methods that a whole branch of criticism has been created which specifically brings the two together. We can see in examples like this why the temptation to do so has proven so strong and why Jacques Derrida would cite as explanation of his reluctance to write on Beckett the almost suffocating closeness their work shared.

In his seminal lecture 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences' Derrida documents a recent rupture in the history of Western metaphysics which has meant a disavowal of meaning as it has been known and in particular the tenets of structuralism. He presents this moment as the birth of what would later be called deconstruction and as providing a blueprint for many of the tools that help to define the process. Essential to the move away from discourses which aim to fix meaning under a strictly regimented structure is the concept of “play” or “freeplay” which is summarised neatly in the following quotation,

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from

freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism.¹⁶⁰

It is within this latter interpretation of interpretation that *Malone Dies* operates. Not content with merely describing or illustrating the inadequacies of signifier and signified through these physically and mentally broken men, the novel pushes toward methods that enact a form of freeplay. The relentlessness in bringing every narrative layer, the meaning of the stories and the themes, which we shall discuss, into a state of permanent flux has the effect of a replacement in the stable base and hierarchy of meaning that is crucial in affirmation along structuralist assumptions. *Malone Dies* aims for a restless uncertainty through methods that assert a state of freeplay is the only viable solution to the inherent flaws in the most basic building blocks of communication. The scope of this means that the methods themselves must also feature within the body of the text. Malone asserts

This time I know where I am going, it is no longer the ancient night, the recent night. Now it is a game, I am going to play. I never knew how to play, till now. I longed to, but I knew it was impossible[...] From now on it will be different. I shall never do anything any more from now on but play. No, I must not begin with an exaggeration. But I shall play a great part of the time, from now on, the greater part, if I can. But perhaps I shall not succeed any better than hitherto. Perhaps as hitherto I shall find myself abandoned, in the dark, without anything to play with. Then I shall play with myself. To have been able to conceive such a plan is encouraging. (MD, p. 174.)

There is of course an inherently sarcastic tone in the way Malone says here he is going to move away from darkness through the use of play. The final line in particular displays the familiar deadpan delivery we see time and time again in Molloy's rambling as well as here. However, if everything is to be questioned then the inherent scepticism is hardly surprising and does not necessarily negate the genuine shift from the ancient and recent night toward a more 'encouraging' method in "play". The degree to which we can say Malone's dialogue with himself moves outwith the boundaries of the novel and speaks more generally with Beckett's oeuvre as a whole is open to debate, but it of course would not be unusual for one

160 Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 292.

of his characters to reference his predecessors, as we shall see further in the chapter. This quotation in particular brings together a self-conscious focus on narrative, which we have argued is instrumental in what is new in the book, and play, coming directly after Malone describes his desire to tell stories. We shall see in the rest of this chapter how Malone's play and the Derridean freeplay it could be argued it is an example of, manifest themselves in other aspects of *Malone Dies*.

Returning to the introduction of birth into the matrix of issues we often find intertwined with death in Beckett's work, we may find the confluence strange, especially considering the most obvious connotations of Eastern reincarnation. We have seen a consideration of alternatives to Western metaphysics in previous work, most notably in the character of Neary within *Murphy*, but the context has never been a replacement of the inadequacies of these established systems with something more spiritual. Certainly the bringing together of birth and death within *Malone Dies* presents a unity in the physicality of the two events, rather than a necessarily philosophical standpoint. We find this even more so in some other examples, such as the following typical reflection from Malone,

All is ready. Except me. I am being given if I may venture the expression, birth into death, such is my impression. The feet are clear already, of the great cunt of existence. Favourable impression I trust. My head will be the last to die. Haul in your hands. I can't. The render rent. My story ended I'll be living yet. Promising lag. That is the end of me. I shall say I no more. (MD, p. 276.)

This treatment of an idea or issue with strikingly base description or imagery is another Beckettian trope by this point in his oeuvre. The pushing of humour into areas so black they transgress what we may feel comfortable laughing at we examined in Molloy's murder of the charcoal burner and the bodily descriptions of the 1946 novellas. The starkness of 'great cunt of existence' is undercut with the punchline 'Favourable impression I trust', but in an unsatisfactory way. Rather than the latter relieving the tension, the subject is too

vital, with Malone returning to the dialogue immediately after, creating with the mismatched tone a space of uncertainty. This ambiguity is mirrored in how we are to understand this bringing together of birth and death. Paul Sheehan argues

If birth and death are not dissimilar, then they are not unique events, not definitive 'cusp' experiences at all. To be human, in Beckett's world, means to undergo a slow suffocation in the amniotic fluid of being, an unwitting and unwilling accessory in a process that resembles a prolonged miscarriage.¹⁶¹

This understanding shares much with the previously cited assertion Beckett's characters occupy a purgatorial state. In both, existence is cast as a sort of terminal no man's land between two not necessarily preferable states, but at the very least active ones. Sheehan and Pilling argue Beckett writes *Everyman*, trapped in a state of indeterminacy and unknowability that cripples them. We can even see this repeated in *On Beckett* in which we know Badiou argues he is going to oppose typical understandings of the author by proposing a more positive, or free Beckett, as he puts it. Andrew Gibson writes of Badiou's somewhat unique approach that

It is important because it points in a quite different direction to the postmodern, poststructuralist and deconstructive methodologies that have been significant for the Beckett criticism of the past decade. But it does this without any lapse back into the foundationalism, representationalism or existential humanism that so dominated work on Beckett before the arrival of Connors and Trezise.¹⁶²

In other words Badiou finds his own path; one in which he is unafraid to define and enclose the various devices Beckett employs and yet that does not deny the ragged, perpetually unfinished nature of the issues Beckett's work explore. This can be seen in his exploration of the point of dying, discussed as a permanent deferral that leaves the character trapped within a loop:

Immobility would thereby find its complete metaphor in the corpse: 'dying' is the conversion of all possible movement into permanent rest. But here again, the irreducibility of the functions means that 'dying' is never death. In *Malone Dies*, one

¹⁶¹ Paul Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) <<http://site.ebrary.com.libproxy.dundee.ac.uk/lib/dundee/docDetail.action?docID=10021402>> [accessed 30 December 2012], p. 164.

¹⁶² Andrew Gibson, 'Beckett and Badiou' in *Beckett and Philosophy* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) p. 93.

sees how movement and language ultimately infect both being and immobility, so that the point of immobility is constantly deferred; it does not allow itself to be constructed otherwise than as the unattainable limits of an increasingly diminishing network of movements, memories and words.¹⁶³

Immobility and the absence of agency is of course a reconfiguration of the same interpretation we have been discussing and can be found in this specific guise within a few different critical works. Ted Billy's essay 'Nothing to be Done': Conrad, Beckett, and the Poetics of Immobility' brings together Joseph Conrad's *Victory* (1915) and *Malone Dies* based on an immobility we could just as easily define as purgatorial or part of the birth/death simultaneity Sheehan argues for.¹⁶⁴ Badiou differs in that he points toward a more open understanding by suggesting that the characters are never immobile, but part of a repetition moving towards an immobility impossible to reach. I would argue that *Malone Dies* differs from previous prose efforts in that, as well as offering the illustrative method we have traced, the repositioning of death as a form of birth strives for a more ambitious endpoint. The effect created reaches beyond the stasis understood in various incarnations by Pilling, Sheehan, Murphy and to an extent Badiou. Malone is not static, but instead the novel suggests he oscillates between death and birth which, like narrative in the novel, creates a new aporetic space in which we can try and look beyond the incumbent restrictions of language and understanding. As Badiou argues, it is a kind of freedom these later works move toward. Both a freedom from the aforementioned restrictions but also from the limitations of the illustrative method that has defined Beckett's work up until this point. Again I would highlight this as an example of the play active within the work. Derrida argues

structure – or rather the structurality of structure – although it has always been involved, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a centre and

163 Badiou, p. 45.

164 Ted Billy, "'Nothing to be Done': Conrad, Beckett, and the Poetics of Immobility', *Conradiana*, 32.1

(2000) <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-

[2003&xri:pqi:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:abell:R00797808:0](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqi:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:abell:R00797808:0)> [accessed 30 December 2012] Billy makes a compelling case, arguing Conrad's characters are illustrative of immobility in much the same way we find in Beckett.

referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this centre was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure – one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganised structure – but above all to make sure that the organising principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *freeplay* of structure.¹⁶⁵

In bringing together birth and death within *Malone Dies* Beckett calls into question the assumptions we make about the nature of the two events. As Paul Sheehan says, they are 'not definitive 'cusp' experiences at all', but are destabilised by being brought together, stripped of the identity and signification with which we associate them. In doing so Beckett is seeking to delimit the freeplay of structure, offering shifting, unstable reworkings of the most fundamental elements of life.

Intratextual Innovation

All is pretext, Sapo and the birds, Moll, the peasants, those who in the tower seek one another out and fly from one another, my doubt which do not interest me, my situation, my possessions, pre-text for not coming to the point, the abandoning, the raising of the arms and going down, without further splash, even though it may annoy the bathers. (MD, p. 270.)

Returning to this quotation we can note it is also typical of a novel which, as argued, offers direct criticism of the goals it has supposedly set out to achieve, even as it goes about trying to accomplish them. Malone expresses an impatience with the stories of Sapo and Macmann, which on the face of it are very much in keeping with Beckett's previous prose efforts. Again, they ostensibly work by a process of illustration. As Paul Davies neatly summarises

By describing what seem to be distinct individuals who are ultimately re-reflections of the same human state, Beckett is able to illustrate the human consequences of a philosophical perspective, without naming it directly.¹⁶⁶

This homogeneous identity Davies addresses is something we have examined in previous chapters as essential to the evolution of Beckett's prose throughout the works. We find in

¹⁶⁵ 'Structure, Sign, and Play...', p. 278.

¹⁶⁶ Paul Davies, 'Three Novels and Four Nouvelles', in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. by John Pilling (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 47.

Malone Dies the same process under way, both in terms of Malone himself, but also through Sapo and Macmann who represent varying levels of disintegration parallel to their age. We have seen this played out in previous works through the younger narrator of *First Love*, who seems a deliberate contrast to the geriatric protagonists of the other 1946 novellas. As argued in chapter three the narrator of this work suffers from the same awarenesses but because of his age has not yet been crushed under its weight. We have also seen the process in Watt's transformation from socially detached, but still functioning member of society, to the institutionalised creature, walking and speaking backwards. Speaking generally we can see in the earliest works like *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *More Pricks Than Kicks* younger protagonists affected by the ruptures in understanding evolved in the later works. This is not to suggest an intentionality from the outset in creating works that could subsequently be developed to include evolved narrators, symptomatic of the effects this understanding creates. Rather that one could quite convincingly make the case Beckett wrote these later works as a response to his first offerings.

However, as I have said *Malone Dies* differs from previous works in that, whilst it includes these illustrative characters it also constantly questions their effectiveness and validity. Returning to the quotation from the novel itself Malone says that 'all is pretext' referring to the stories being told and Malone's story itself for 'not coming to the point, the abandoning...' (MD, p. 270.) Here, I think, Beckett is addressing not just the progress of *Malone Dies* but his work as a whole. As I have argued, in many ways *Molloy* represents the zenith of this illustrative, character driven approach developed through the prose works up until that point. The previous chapter of this thesis ended asking if anything more could be done with the medium of literature and language to progress past the point of metaphysical

refusal toward an alternative means and end. In chapter two we examined how *Watt* was essentially a novel about the epiphanic moment of realising the failures in structure and dealing with the immediate crises it brought about. To a certain extent we can see *Malone Dies* operating in the same way. Although this is clearly a novel accumulative in its focus on the elderly tramp figure in contrast to *Watt*, it still shares a base of circumstance resulting from the same realisation. The difference between the two is an inbuilt mechanism of dissatisfaction with its own possible ends in *Malone Dies*. Malone points to the end as this release, this abandoning in which, rather than merely revealing the unknowability of the world using the tools of language, he gives himself over to the vacuum left in its wake. This end, which of course encompasses the death of Malone, but more fundamentally points to a relinquishing of attempts at replacing the absence, is suggested throughout the text, but not necessarily complemented by what it achieves.

The example though is typical of how Malone fits into the text and the stories he tells. Essentially he supplants much of the role usually assigned to the reader. He does this by openly speculating on the import and meaning of the issues the book addresses, but of course with a greater degree of awareness, being the “author” of these stories. Despite the autobiographical elements contained within them Malone's method of delivery does not feel like recollection, but rather a fluid invoking of past events into a renewed context via the creative process of the stories he forges. In 'The Harpooned Notebook: *Malone Dies*' H. Porter Abbott argues the novel operates within a pre-existing generic framework he calls the 'intercalated or nonretrospective'¹⁶⁷ narrative. This is to say a mode where there is no looking back in terms of the text. It unfolds continuously with the character and is unchecked, comparable to a found document or diary. Abbott describes the three elements

167 H. Porter Abbott, 'The Harpooned Notebook: *Malone Dies*' in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988)

that define the genre as the threatened or vulnerable manuscript, time as it runs into form, and lastly the blank entries of the document. We can certainly see these elements within the novel. As I have said the contrast is between what are clearly partially recollected stories with the present creative framework Malone uses. This is illustrated in the following example from the part of the novel which demarcates the story of youth in Sapo, to the story of adulthood in Macmann:

For Sapo – no, I can't call him that any more, and I even wonder how I was able to stomach such a name till now. So then for, let me see, Macmann, that's not much better but there is no time to lose... (MD, p. 222.)

The vulnerable manuscript is a consequence of Malone's existence in the institution and the blank entries within the document we see most clearly in the disintegration of the novel which occurs at its conclusion. However, what we find here is that Malone has a strange relationship with time and the place his characters occupy in it. At certain points it almost seems the events of Sapo and Macmann are not only real, but also occurring concurrently with Malone's deathbed activities. In the following example it is almost as if the events of the stories are taking place all the time, but Malone's choice is whether or not he shall observe them. He says:

I shall try and get myself out of the bed, for a start. If not I do not know what I shall do. Go and see how Macmann is getting on perhaps. I have always that resource. Why this need of activity? I am growing nervous. (MD, p. 248.)

Further to this we often have descriptions that suggest that not only are the stories real and loose in time with Malone's present state, but further that when he describes them he actually occupies these characters in some sense. This is very much in keeping with the relationship Malone has, not only to Sapo and Macmann, but also to the protagonists of previous Beckett works. Whether or not we agree *Malone Dies* fulfils the other two prerequisites of Abbott's definition of the 'intercalated or nonretrospective' narrative, there is certainly a strong case to be made that in the novel time runs into form.

In previous chapters we noted the apparently inconsequential nature of the novels' plotting and the seemingly arbitrary progress they made. In *Malone Dies* this is taken further with a degree of the story taking place in what are clearly autobiographical fictional fragments alongside the present observations of Malone in his bedridden state. In the former, the stories of Sapo and Macmann, we have the same attention to seemingly trivial aspects of their lives and conditions. For example, Sapo's story is clearly a pastiche of a boyhood memoir, with key incidents in the formation of the character's outlook and circumstance related in turn. *Malone Dies*, in typically Beckettian fashion, shifts to instead relate minor everyday occurrences for Sapo: his mediocre performance at school, his preference to be out in the fields rather than with his family. The focus of the major incidents in this part of the narrative is in fact not on Sapo at all, but instead on the Lambert family, which in a typically Beckettian reversal allows central character Sapo to be the observer, rather than the observed.

Much like the rural Lynch family of *Watt*, we have in the Lamberts a poverty stricken household, ruled by cruelty and damned by circumstance. Sapo observes their interactions from his sitting place on their windowsill, leaving them small gifts in exchange for being allowed to spend time in their house. Much like in *Molloy* there are moments blackly comic, alongside bitter, cruel instances, creating a space of uncertainty for the reader. In Sapo's time with the Lamberts we have the burying of their dead mule, its protruding legs hit with a shovel to fit in the grave. We also have Big Lambert's obsession with his job as a 'bleeder and disjointer of pigs.' (MD, p. 194.) Through the winter he is sought after by many for his skills in this area and becomes almost entranced in the pleasure he takes from it. It is noted that:

And for days afterwards he could speak of nothing but the pig he had just dispatched, I would say into the other world if I was not aware that pigs have none but this, to the great affliction of his family. But they did not dare protest, for they feared him. Yes, at an age when most people cringe and cower, as if to apologise for still being present, Lambert was feared and in a position to do as he pleased. And even his young wife had abandoned all hope of bringing him to heel, by means of her cunt, that trump card of young wives. ^(MD, p. 194.)

This passage is very similar in tone to episodes such as Watt and Sam aiding in the cannibalisation of animals within their post-lapsarian Garden of Eden or Molloy's aforementioned murder of the charcoal burner, discussed in previous chapters. There is a detachment to the emotions such cruel and base descriptions may bring forth. They are treated as merely incidental examples of the state human beings share within the world. Paul Davies argues these are examples of the realities one is faced with when trying to live by a 'philosophical perspective'.¹⁶⁸ This ignorance we exist in is illustrated through the extremities of the Lamberts' situation or any of the other examples mentioned. Although they may seem entirely detached from our own existence, they are in fact just as much a condition of the absence in understanding human beings share. What repulses us about them are merely the most forceful of states we cannot find an adequate way to engage with. As Davies notes they are illustrative of the human consequences of our utter ignorance of even the tools we may need to begin a process of comprehension.

It is not just by observation of the themes of *Malone Dies* we can ascertain its relationship with Beckett's previous prose efforts. The novel has an intratextual relationship with them, offering many blatant references to the sometimes separate, sometimes unified protagonists at the core of these works. Alongside the stories of Sapo and Macmann we have Malone on his deathbed, who from the outset of the novel offers ambiguous clues as to his relationship with previous Beckettian protagonists. We can see in the following quotation an example of the suggestion he often makes of multiple consciousnesses occupying the

¹⁶⁸ Davies, p. 47.

same body. He says:

Of myself I could never tell, any more than live or tell of others. How could I have, who never tried? To show myself now, on the point of vanishing, at the same time as the stranger, and by the same grace, that would be no ordinary last straw. Then live, long enough to feel, behind my closed eyes, other eyes close. What an end. ^(MD, p. 190.)

The opening line aligns Malone with Beckett, as the artist whose project is undermined by his inability to represent. We have traced this throughout the works; the aspects of these characters, especially those latter authors who share the same frustrations as their creator. However, we can detect a shift in approach in what Malone says next. The possibility of showing himself, of representation, is offered as a possibility and this is something that has been closed off in the past. He is still talking of his death, but imagining that after a lifetime of being crippled by ineffability he is able, on his deathbed, finally to express his existence. Again, one cannot help but feel with this Beckett is expressing something of his own predicament. We have already seen that narrative choices in the novel have the effect of opening up possibilities that try and surmount unknowability, but here we may detect an example within the content of the novel itself. Malone refers to his own life, but also to the lives of former Beckett characters. The stranger referred to is somewhat ambiguous, but we can identify by the next sentence a reference to Watt, Murphy, Malone and so on. The idea of eyes closing behind his own, after the possibility to express has been fulfilled is new territory for Beckett's novels. We have seen in previous works the way Beckett often has past characters appear and identifies each new protagonist as a kind of reincarnation of these; embodying physical and mental traits that come to be the identifiable composition of the archetypal Beckettian hero. The suggestion is of respite, of moving beyond the stasis or indeterminacy identified by Pilling, Sheehan and Badiou into death, but a death brought on by the possibility of expression. The eyes closing behind Malone's are the end of these characters and also the end of the need for more of the same as will be shown in *The Unnamable* and *How It Is*.

This can be seen further in an example from later in the novel, even more overt in identifying Malone as the end of a particular sequence:

And if I ever stop talking it will be because there is nothing more to be said, even though all has not been said, even though nothing has been said. But let us leave these morbid matters and get on with that of my demise, in two or three days if I remember rightly. Then it will be all over with the Murphys, Merciers, Molloyes, Morans and Malones, unless it goes on beyond the grave. ^(MD, p. 229.)

This is an example not only of the intratextuality we have been discussing, but also the type of narrative interjection highlighted earlier in which the illustrative method of Beckett's work is criticised within *Malone Dies* itself. The suggestion is again a more positive sentiment than we have already seen and indeed a playful one. Despite the fact Beckett is again addressing ineffability with the admission 'nothing has been said', there is an acceptance of this and a relinquishing of the desire to understand. As Malone says, things must move past this stage to his own end and the end of Beckett's characters as we know them. Again, one does not wish to attribute the degree of foresight displayed in *Malone Dies* speculatively but it certainly seems to anticipate the emptying of character we find in the two novels to come. The choice to list the characters as plurals identifies their uniformity as a series. Eventually we will just have a voice and this idea of the simultaneously divergent and homogeneous protagonists seems prescient of this. The idea of letting go of inexpressibility and subsequently attempting new avenues of exploration is, in terms of Beckett's oeuvre, a significant shift which should not be understated. Looking to the often cited quotation from *Damned to Fame*, in which Beckett felt a crucial point in his career was the realisation he had to attempt the opposite of Joyce's totality of content¹⁶⁹, I think we can see how to a certain extent these controlled moves towards reduction had been focused in very specific areas and defined the work up until *Molloy*. *Malone Dies* embodies a new freedom in the prose in that it brings everything into question including, as

¹⁶⁹ Knowlson, p. 134.

we have seen, the very tools Beckett has been refining throughout the works. Derrida describes the point of rupture in Western thought in the following way: 'This moment was that in which language invaded the universal problematic; that in which, in the absence of a centre or origin, everything became discourse...'¹⁷⁰ We can see in Beckett's new form of intratextuality an even greater desire to abandon an orientating principle and offer a freeplay of signification without end.

A New Kind of Violence

This can further be seen in the approach the novel takes towards physicality and violence. We have already examined how distinctions in tone become blurred when base descriptions of body are inserted amongst serious reflection. Like so much in the novel, it can appear on the surface that the inclusion of these physical descriptions is purely a repetition of what we have seen in previous work. Firstly we have the detailing of Malone's failing body, as in the following example:

For my arse for example, which can hardly be accused of being the end of anything, if my arse suddenly started to shit at the present moment, which God forbid, I firmly believe the lumps would fall out in Australia. (MD, p. 228.)

This type of description is most heavily used within the four novellas and we have examined its effects in previous chapters. There is primarily an attempt to bring discourse on the metaphysical concepts the works reflect upon down into an area usually detached from lofty reflection. By doing so Beckett forces these discourses together with the often cruel and disgusting reality of the world they supposedly interpret. We find, in Macmann's relationship with Moll another typical theme and form of description in sex between elderly characters. Like Molloy's relationship with Lousse the acts are described in ways purposefully debasing and graphic, part of Beckett's attempts to drag metaphysical concerns into a far grimmer, realistic domain. Malone tells us of their relations:

¹⁷⁰ 'Structure, Sign, and Play...', p. 280.

summoning to their aid all the resources of the skin, the mucus and the imagination, in striking from their dry and feeble lips a kind of sombre gratification. (MD, p. 253.)

The spectacle was then offered of Macmann trying to bundle his sex into his partner's like a pillow into a pillow-slip, folding it in two and stuffing it in with his fingers. (MD, p. 253.)

These examples form part of the illustrative basis we have already discussed as essential to Beckett's prose writing by this point. It is however when the physical moves into the violent that we detect a shift, in keeping with the rejection or critique of the illustrative that *Malone Dies* attempts.

We have at various stages of the novel examples of violence that are represented in much the same manner already seen in previous works. Big Lambert in particular could be one of the Lynch family from *Watt* with the violence toward his wife and obsession with bleeding pigs. There is also the priest-like figure in Macmann's room who strikes him on the head, aligning the sanctity of religion with a much more physical impulse in a way we can see again when he kisses Moll, 'And in the pleasure he was later to enjoy, when he put his tongue in her mouth and let it wander over her gums, this rotten crucifix had assuredly its part.' (MD, p. 257.) It is in the last scene of the novel however that the violence of the book takes on a new meaning altogether. Again, it is the new focus on the narrative process which shifts our understanding of violence into an area of uncertainty. Lemuel, the nurse that replaces Moll, is a creature of violence who regularly smashes his own head with a hammer and who is assigned to take Malone and some other inmates on a day trip to a nearby island. This is funded by Lady Pedal, whose charitable intentions are mocked by what happens once the strange assortment of characters dock their boat. Lemuel, seemingly without motivation, kills two members of the party with a hatchet and abandons the now injured Lady Pedal, who has fallen on seeing the dead men, possibly breaking her hip. The action of the story ends with the remaining members of the party getting back on

the boat and floating off in the bay. The final image is of Lemuel raising the bloodied hatchet. However, the manner in which this is recounted requires discussion. As the novel comes to an end there is a process of disintegration in the text. First breaking into smaller paragraphs and then into sentences we find the narrative process again brought to the fore as *Malone Dies* crumbles:

Lemuel is in charge, he raises his hatchet on which the blood will never dry, but not to hit anyone, he will not hit anyone, he will not hit anyone any more, he will not touch anyone any more, either with it or with it or with or

or with it or with his hammer or with his stick or with his fist or in thought in dream I mean never he will never

or with his pencil or with his stick or

or light light I mean

never there he will never

never anything

there

any more (MD, pp. 280-281.)

In terms of the central narratives of Malone and Macmann which comprise the latter half of the novel, this unravelling of the text further aligns the two characters, with their respective ends occurring simultaneously. We read Macmann's end ambiguously. He is being taken by the homicidal Lemuel on a journey that's end is closed to us. For Malone these last lines could be seen as the expiration of his life; a strange poem in which the title of the novel is finally realised. Or, if we are to think of Macmann as a loosely shrouded Malone, brought into a fictional life through the narratives of the novel, then this endpoint again points to uncertainty over the actual state the characters occupy. It could be that reaching the conclusion of Macmann's tale and his potential end is enough to cease the purgatorial state Malone has been occupying; a kind of life flashing before the narrator that brings the false state of writing his life to a conclusion. The sentence 'with his pencil or

with his stick' is a further symbolic clue that Lemuel, as well as being separate, is also a part of Malone the author, the other character-authors, and of course suggestively Beckett himself. Roñán McDonald notes that 'In the last few lines, as the characters in Malone's story are violently dispatched, his narrative voice begins to flail and fail, the language breaks down into separate words, and partial lines, indicating both the dying narrative and the dying narrator. It is one of the few moments in Beckett's oeuvre where form mimics content so explicitly.'¹⁷¹ It seems clear that whilst the ending raises many questions and clues it is not a definitive answer we should be seeking. As McDonald notes the lack of resolution created through the novel's unexpectedly brutal and then ambiguously serene ending is mirrored and enhanced through the form of its final lines. The method again brings forth a state of play.

In 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' Derrida questions

Where and how does this decentering, this notion of the structurality of structure, occur? It would be somewhat naïve to refer to an event, a doctrine, or an author in order to designate this occurrence. It is no doubt part of the totality of an era, our own, but still it has already begun to proclaim itself and begin to work.¹⁷²

In the violence of *Malone Dies*, in the way it reaffirms these established concerns of death and intratextuality whilst at the same time elevating these to a new level of freeplay it moves beyond the fleetingly poststructuralist moments of the previous works, anticipating concerns only to be articulated in the decades to come. I have tried to show that the persistent narrative focus of the novel not only offers a play which embodies a different approach to the metaphysical problems Beckett had tried to address with his illustrative method, but that it also lifts these established tropes out of their inherent possibilities enabling a level of restless interchange where, as Badiou suggests, 'a kind of freedom'¹⁷³ is

¹⁷¹ *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Roñán McDonald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 99.

¹⁷² 'Structure, Sign, and Play...', p. 280.

¹⁷³ Badiou, p. 55.

possible. As Derrida suggests it would be not only be a grandiose proclamation, but also a naïve one to assert Beckett articulates the concerns of deconstruction twenty years before the term was coined. However, *Malone Dies* is far more than merely the bridging work between two more important novels it can often be represented as. More than ever before it is a novel that does not look back, but instead forwards in offering possibilities essential in Beckett's development and the work to come.

Chapter Six:

Narrative Method and Deconstruction in *The Unnamable*

In the previous chapter we examined how the notion of “freeplay” as described in Jacques Derrida's seminal lecture 'Structure, Sign, And Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' was enacted in *Malone Dies* through novel uses of aspects like character and narrative. Before that, I had begun this thesis by claiming that how Beckett was using his influences in *Murphy* was “bricolage”, as defined by Derrida. The “antifictional” elements of *Watt* were cited as early evidence in support of the idea Beckett's work deconstructs itself. With the four 1946 novellas it was their openness to the accusation of nihilism also levelled at deconstruction that brought Beckett's work in proximity with the movement and similarly in *Molloy* it was the question of a communal purpose that seemed to align Beckett and deconstruction. In this chapter we are going to examine the idea that *The Unnamable* is the endpoint of an evolutionary form of prose writing which began with *Murphy*, took firm shape in the 1946 novellas and accelerated through several refining methods in *The Trilogy*. Specifically we are going to pose a direct question that has been hinted at and offered partially in previous chapters. Is *The Unnamable* a deconstructionist novel? We can trace in the most prominent aspects of the work methods which are not just analogous to a poststructuralist perspective, but are an active and prescient form of deconstruction. This chapter aims to explore these aspects fully and conclude upon both the truth and possibility of having a deconstructive novel, and the consequent effect such a notion might have on Beckett's oeuvre as a whole.

Certainly Paul Stewart sees an inextricable link between Beckett and Derrida, suggesting that 'perhaps, as one writes of Beckett one must, at some level, be writing of Derrida, for

there exists between the two writers, at the very least, some notion of a certain kinship.'¹⁷⁴ Although this is perhaps somewhat of a generalisation, especially if one is looking exclusively at the earlier work, the idea that there is an intangible, yet highly perceptible confluence of approach and thought between the two writers is something we shall be trying to explore in this chapter.

Essentially 'Structure, Sign and Play' presents the idea that there has been a rupture in Western thought regarding assumptions about the truth of traditional structural philosophy. It then moves onto an active deconstruction of some works by structuralist Emmanuel Levinas, which help to illustrate this break with tradition whilst also describing the methodology of deconstruction as it progresses. Assessing the idea one could pinpoint a specific moment when this occurred, Derrida asks

Where and how does this decentering, this thinking the structurality of structure, occur? It would be somewhat naïve to refer to an event, a doctrine, or an author in order to designate this occurrence. It is no doubt part of the totality of an era, our own, but still it has already begun to proclaim itself and begun to *work*.¹⁷⁵

If we are to think of this idea alongside the responses Derrida gave to Derek Attridge regarding his reluctance to attempt a deconstruction of Beckett's work I believe we can see the pertinence of directly examining *The Unnamable* as a novel that deconstructs. As stated in a previous chapter on *Molloy*, Attridge questions the reasons behind Derrida's seemingly odd decision not to write on Beckett, considering the similarities in thought the two seem to share. Derrida responds by saying that Beckett is a writer who differs from all others, at least in terms of how Derrida can apprehend him. He suggests they are not just similar but that 'This is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close...' ¹⁷⁶ Furthermore he notes that Beckett's French is so

¹⁷⁴ Paul Stewart, *Zone of Evaporation: Samuel Beckett's Disjunctions* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2006), p. 158.

¹⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 354

¹⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 61.

much his own language, being as it is a second language shot through with a Dubliner's sensibility and strange idiomatic identity that he would need to invent a whole new counter-language to respond to it. This is indeed a problem any Beckett critic will encounter and which renders a traditional reading, especially of his later works, somewhat redundant. When we have a work which is systematically and convincingly dislocating the structures of thought we would use to assess it one can often feel foolish in doing so. Pressed by Attridge into the type of enquiry we are conducting here Derrida is unusually direct in the following exchange:

D.A.: Is there a sense in which Beckett's writing is already so "deconstructive," or "self-deconstructive," that there is not much left to do?

J.D.: No doubt that's true... Above all, this question should not be treated as a philosophical problem outside or above the texts. When I found myself, with students, reading some Beckett texts, I would take three lines, I would spend two hours on them, then I would give up because it would not have been possible, or honest, or even interesting, to extract a few "significant" lines from a Beckett text.¹⁷⁷

This last idea, that isolating Beckett in what is essentially close-reading is a fruitless endeavour is no doubt key in understanding the *modus operandi* of a novel like *The Unnamable* and we will return to the way this arrests the critic later. However, broadly speaking the idea that Beckett's work deconstructs itself and is consequently an example of deconstruction is what this chapter seeks to determine. As Derrida points out in the quotation from 'Structure, Sign, and Play' this unravelling of assumptions about structure is not just the work of the few, but something manifest in our history, something that has 'begun to proclaim itself and begun to *work*.'¹⁷⁸ Is there any reason a novel (if we are to take the liberty of calling *The Unnamable* that) or any other form or art or representation could not just comment upon or work parallel to deconstruction, but in fact be an example of it? Key is Derrida's careful use of the words 'begun to *work*' because in this we already find part of the answer. One could reasonably object that deconstruction is not in fact a

¹⁷⁷ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, p. 61.

¹⁷⁸ Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play', p. 354.

homogeneous movement at all and that its key proponents differ wildly in their approaches and beliefs. If we take a member of the more theoretically focused Yale School, someone like Paul De Man and compare him to Julia Kristeva and her augmenting of deconstructionist ideas with psychoanalytic concepts then we can see the distance such a label is forced to cover. How can a novel be an example of something as disparate and shifting as deconstruction then? The answer is that it is, of course, not a school of thought at all. The very idea would reinforce the affirmative metaphysics it seeks to discredit. In fact the only thing that does bind these various thinkers is, as Derrida suggests, *work*; deconstructive thought is a method and not a philosophy in the traditional sense. So, when speaking of a shared understanding that 'proclaim[s] itself' Beckett can legitimately be a key proponent. In his book on a similarly contentious and to a degree poststructuralist theoretical movement H. Aram Veeseer writes 'The New Historicism remains a phrase without an adequate referent.'¹⁷⁹ He subsequently suggests that the only thing tying together New Historicist thinkers is a shared set of 'themes, preoccupations, and attitudes.'¹⁸⁰ Based on this he produces a list of five assumptions¹⁸¹ (first for *The New Historicism* (1989) and later revised in *The New Historicism Reader* (1994)) which facilitate our labelling of certain thinkers with the term. The same kind of formalising has not been achieved with deconstruction in such a successful¹⁸² and enduring manner but

179 H. Aram Veeseer, 'Introduction', in *The New Historicism*, ed. by H. Aram Veeseer (London: Routledge, 1989), p. x.

180 H. Aram Veeseer, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

181 These are in full:

'1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;

2. that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;

3. that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably;

4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;

5. finally, as emerges powerfully in this volume, that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.' H. Aram Veeseer, 'Introduction', p. xi.

One can see, especially with assumptions 2, 3 and 4, the partially poststructuralist base of New Historicism in the in-built critique of structural tools such as language and the rejection of discourse as a means to uncovering final truths.' H. Aram Veeseer, 'Introduction', p. xi.

182 Criticism abounds whenever one tries to define a movement, but especially a movement like New Historicism that is based on a Foucauldian assumption we have traditionally misunderstood history. However, it is testament to the strength of Veeseer's formalising that it is still largely applicable to the movement as it

'Structure, Sign, and Play' is probably the closest the movement has to a manifesto. In describing the history of the break with structure Derrida touches on each of the key moves which, like Veese's five assumptions, bring together deconstructive thinkers as tightly as possible. The rest of this chapter will look at some of these moves, methods and assumptions and assess how much we can see them at work within *The Unnamable*.

Summarising the content of this work is in some respects a far simpler task than any of the previous novels. It is not overly complex in terms of the number of characters, settings or events and yet still remains, because of its nature, slippery to grasp. I am reluctant to say it is the interior monologue of a single protagonist, as this gives a fixed identity to the speaking voice, which is rejected by the various other characters he observes and also seems to inhabit. These are named Mahood (formerly Basil) and Worm, and alongside the former protagonists of Beckett's novels weave in and out of the wandering musings of this unnamable entity, helping to construct a story which is both the culmination and the untelling of all Beckett's novels have done before. Settings and events are limited to ambiguous description in which he purposefully limits our understanding. This said, there is still a focus on the telling of stories and, much like in *Malone Dies*, we are offered strange episodes in which the banal and domestic are mixed with the outlandish and extraordinary. Perhaps in *The Unnamable* there is an even greater focus on the latter with descriptions of The Unnamable's family 'carried off by sausage-poisoning, in great agony' (TU, p. 312.), as well as Worm's existence as a kind of lump of flesh, taken care of by a strange woman, in a jar opposite a chop-house. If you have followed the reasoning that these characters are occupying a purgatorial space to a greater and greater extent as the novels

has shifted and evolved through the years, largely due to the acknowledgement any such formalising is already hampered before it begins. This is assumption 4: 'that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature.' H. Aram Veese, 'Introduction', p. xi. The exact same kind of acknowledgement must always be in mind when thinking on deconstruction and especially in trying to in some way define or restrict it.

have progressed then one can read this as the point at which this is confirmed. However, if one believes Beckett's work resists such a fixed idea then it could be said the idea of multiple characters occupying the inside of a skull or a kind of purgatory is invoked, without being subscribed to.¹⁸³

One of the most tangible pieces of descriptions *The Unnamable* offers is near the start of the novel in which he outlines the strange world he occupies. From his vantage point he observes 'The place is no doubt vast. Dim intermittent lights suggest a kind of distance.' (TU, p. 287.) He then goes on to describe himself as at the centre of entities which revolve around him. At first he can only see Malone from the waist up: 'Malone is there. Of his mortal liveliness little trace remains. He passes before me at doubtless intervals, unless it is I who pass before him. No, once and for all, I do not move.' (TU, p. 287.) However, after a time it becomes clear there are more and perhaps all of the previous novels' protagonists revolving around him, at various distances. If we are seeking to examine the possibility *The Unnamable* may be a deconstructionist novel we have in this, our first problem. In 'Structure, Sign, and Play' Derrida says of the break with traditional structural thinking that

Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions come into play... a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.¹⁸⁴

This is an absolutely essential part of deconstructive thought. It is the idea that, motivated by a desire to reconcile the aporetic uncertainties of true structure, the human condition is

183 *The Unnamable* may be the most ambiguous and obscure of Beckett's novels up until that point, but contained within the wandering narrative are the same themes that have interested the author throughout his career. The idea of his characters occupying a semi-literal purgatorial or even hellish reality, depending on your perspective, is again here and alluded to in examples such as the following: 'For I am obliged to assign a beginning to my residence here, if only for the sake of clarity. Hell itself, although eternal, dates from the revolt of Lucifer.' TU, p. 289.

184 Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play', pp. 353-354.

to fabricate a centre; a stable ground that allows sign-substitutions to function authoritatively, whilst also remaining detached from these signs in order not to be infected by their clear fallibility. Derrida's assertion that there is no transcendental signified, that all stable ground is a fiction, dispenses with a centre and offers instead a non-structure that sees an endless network of unanchored signs. If we are trying to examine the possibility *The Unnamable* is a deconstructionist novel then does this opening not present a significant problem? It would seem that way, having *The Unnamable* at the centre of this world, with previous characters revolving around him like planets no less, emphasising in a typically Beckettian stroke the illustrative relationship of the personal to the universal.¹⁸⁵ It is certainly possible that in fact what a novel like *The Unnamable* does is to present itself as something revolutionary because of its abstract and conceptual nature whilst actually reaffirming hierarchical understandings of structure based upon a centre-proximity relationship. However, it should be noted that this is not representative of the book as a whole and that before passing judgement it is necessary to examine other facets.

The novel does not exclusively follow this descriptive path. Moving in time as well as space we leave behind the arena where past characters revolve around *The Unnamable*. The return to storytelling in the twin tales of Mahood and Worm are a strange kind of memoir which may be said to betray and disavow the book's opening. This is achieved through the narrative form, which is also the clearest example of how the novel seems to mirror Derrida's writing in particular. After the introductory parts of the book, which are a kind of reflection on the character's situation and its apparently physical surroundings, there is a paragraph in which he announces

All these Murphys, Molloyes, and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and me alone. But I just said I have spoken of me, am speaking of

¹⁸⁵ '...like a planet about its sun.' TU, p. 289.

me. I don't care a curse what I just said. It is now I shall speak of me, for the first time.
(TU, p. 297.)

This shift to the interior, to reflection upon the self is mirrored in the presentation of the text itself. Dispensing with paragraph breaks or indeed breaks of any kind (section, chapter and so on) the novel becomes one giant, unruly paragraph. Reminiscent of Molloy's rambling, with clause building upon clause, the dizzying effect this type of writing creates demands a requisite type of reading which is almost hypnotic in the way it draws in attention. Ideas are introduced, abandoned, returned to, intermingled with vignettes of storytelling in such a way that to retain a grip on the text one is forced to read it doggedly, attention fixed at a regular pace. If one's mind begins to wander, even momentarily, then regaining hold of the various strands is extremely difficult. In *Understanding Poststructuralism* James Williams attempts to explain both the difficulty in reading Derrida's work and the necessity in his mode of writing. He explains that:

When you write you participate in the series of texts, not by adding a separate block, but by transferring the endless tissue of texts. This argument explains why Derrida's work can be very hard to read when first encountered. If we are used to reading quite short and hermeneutic sentences and paragraphs, then his long ones can be hard to follow and even harder to break down into separate ideas. This is because the very idea of that kind of separateness is resisted in *Of Grammatology*.¹⁸⁶

I am not trying to draw attention to a merely superficial similarity in these two writers' work, namely, they both write very long, difficult to understand sentences. It is the reason behind this choice which is of interest. Despite the apparent reinforcing of structural norms in the introductory part of the novel, the subsequent mode of the restless, endless paragraph suggests an alternative purpose. Williams is reiterating the Derridean position when he says we participate in an 'endless tissue of texts'. This refers to the argument that no text is finished, that all texts not only recycle each other in an intertextual sense, but that wider than that all signs participate in an endless series of substitutions without an identifiable base. This is the "endless chain" often referred to by Derrida and wider in

¹⁸⁶ James Williams, *Understanding Poststructuralism* (Chesham: Acumen, 2005), p. 26.

deconstructive texts generally. He writes 'The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain.'¹⁸⁷ There is an endless tissue of texts containing a limitless chain of signifiers because language can never achieve the presence it seeks. The form of *The Unnamable* is a reflection of this knowledge. It offers no certainties, only 'affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered' (TU, p. 285.), fragments of stories, philosophy, snippets of texts both Beckettian and otherwise all forced out together, in an interwoven chain which moves through these in a futile attempt to supplant the need for presence within language. As we have been tracing and Daniel Katz articulates, 'the shift from "L'Absent" to *L'Innomable*, from ontology, matter, and presence, to naming, law, and signification, I think can legitimately be seen as a shift from a binary oppositional structure of presence and absence into a differential, or supplemental schema.' Deconstructive texts often work by seeking out the "traces" in a text. James Williams described the process in the following manner: 'But signs in language contain the trace of their contexts, of their histories and of their futures. So any sign, any event, is marked by things that lie outside it. It is not an unalloyed presence, but the trace of the processes that came to make it.'¹⁸⁸ There is no finality in the trace, no origin, as per the fundamental beliefs of deconstruction. The milieu of overlapping ideas from both inside and outside the text in the narrative mode of the novel affirms the trace and embeds the validity of the notion within *The Unnamable* itself.

In 'The Exhausted' Gilles Deleuze breaks down Beckett's language into three separate types. Speaking of the language of *The Unnamable* he says 'But if one thereby hopes to exhaust the possible with words, one must also hope to exhaust the words themselves; whence the need for another metalanguage, a *language II*, which is no longer a language of

¹⁸⁷ Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play', p. 389.

¹⁸⁸ Williams, p. 26.

names but of voices, a language that no longer operates with combinable atoms but with blendable flows.¹⁸⁹ Deleuze defines the language of *The Unnamable* by its difference from his *language I*, which works by the content of what is being said within Beckett's previous work. In *The Unnamable* we have *language II* which operates and enacts through form. For Deleuze what the voice says is still important, but how it says it, its unrelenting and forever shifting nature that Deleuze calls 'blendable flows' is the defining aspect of this new approach. Another of the key aspects of deconstruction is its self-awareness. The Unnamable knows with every word he participates in an inescapable falsehood and yet is compelled to continue this stream of utterances. In fact, despite his evolution (or devolution if we prefer) from the other characters of the novels he still refers to himself as a writer, keeping that aspect of The Trilogy in unison. He says

How in such conditions, can I write, to consider only the manual aspect of that bitter folly? I don't know, I could know. But I shall not know. Not this time. It is I who write, who cannot raise my hand from my knee. It is I who think, just enough to write...
(TU, p. 295.)

The novel does not shy away from its status as text. The Unnamable writes this patchwork of ideas, aware the whole time of its inherent failure at passing beyond the limitations of language and communication. As Derrida writes 'But we cannot do without the concept of the sign, for we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directly against this complicity.'¹⁹⁰ However, what kind of criticism can this be? One that declares and pays testament to its futility with each subsequent sentence? I think we can see that, as in deconstruction, an awareness of the disharmony within the structuralism that has held and guided the development of language does not mean we cannot aim for something greater. Although we can never entirely bypass the limitations of language, we can use it to strive for a greater method; something that opens possibilities,

189 Gilles Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', in *Essays Critical and Cultural*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), p. 156.

190 Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play', p. 355.

rather than closing them down.

In *The Unnamable*, as in previous works we have examined, Beckett works on one level through an illustrative method. The relentless, sprawling monologue effectively proclaims the redundancy of communication. It suffocates meaning by starving us of the space to breathe within a text. It uses a seemingly endless stream of words that erase themselves as they go. Williams says 'Deconstruction works to release writing from the grip of an inner voice and from speech.'¹⁹¹ This is precisely where *The Unnamable* aims. At one point The Unnamable questions 'In a word, shall I be able to speak of me and of this place without plotting an end to us, shall I ever be able to go silent, is there any connexion between these two questions? Nothing like issues. There are a few to be going on with, perhaps only one.' (TU, p. 289.) In these relatively obtuse remarks The Unnamable in fact outlines two central and interconnected concerns of the novel. The first is just as I have been commenting upon. The book is an attempt to move past the point of expression which has been necessary but also a hindrance to demonstrating the inadequacies of structure. Shane Weller neatly summarises how Beckett has come to this point, writing that

Beyond Malone's final 'never anything/there/any more' (T289), with the naïve calculation of death having been exposed at the beginning of *The Unnamable*, we find that narration-negation has yet another calculation upon which to rely: that if the nothing is not to be experienced in the flight from object-world or subject-world (*Murphy* and *Watt*), or even from all world (*Malone Dies*), then it may just be possible in silence.¹⁹²

As I have said, the way the text is presented for its majority is an attempt to exist, to overcome the seeming necessity in saying nothing instead of fruitless expression. The second issue is that, if one has to choose the mode of communication The Unnamable does in order to move towards a silence that is an untelling of the issues we have examined in previous chapters as central to Beckett's work, does this become the only concern? Is this

¹⁹¹ Williams, p. 30.

¹⁹² Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), p. 105.

in opposition to a silence without a referent? In other words, is it possible to refuse language in a way that encapsulates all of the issues that has brought one to that point of recognition or does one simply engage in a meaningless silence? This is a key issue for *The Unnamable* as a novel and especially for a reader less informed of Beckett's previous work. It may be that the evolutionary process of his prose writing had to culminate in this silence, in this strange relinquishing of control through an excess of words, but does this in fact reduce the maelstrom of issues which have always been at the heart of Beckett's writing to a marginalised position?¹⁹³ As an isolated piece of work the issues which are the impetus for the methodology Beckett adopts in his narrative style are certainly buried deeper by the silence. This is a risk the work takes. The Unnamable acknowledges as much when he says 'Long or short, the same silence. Then I resurrect and begin again. That's what I'll have got for all my pains. Unless this time it's the real silence at last. Perhaps I've said the thing that had to be said, that gives me the right to be done with speech.' (TU, p. 387.) Here we find an acknowledgement of the accumulative process Beckett has undertaken in his work. *The Unnamable*, that reaches for a final silence is an attempt to both accomplish the zenith of a form which would accommodate Beckett's ideas of redundancy, negation and so forth whilst also bringing the project to its conclusion.

Of course after a lengthy break in which Beckett has acknowledged his trouble at finding new ground for his fiction to cover he returned to the novel and wrote *How It Is* (1961). Beckett said of *The Unnamable*: 'The French work brought me to the point where I felt I was saying the same thing over and over again. For some authors writing gets easier and easier the more they write. For me it gets more and more difficult. For me the area of possibilities, gets smaller and smaller... At the end of my work there's nothing but dust... In

193 I am thinking here of issues such as death, purgatory, isolation, exile, love, influence and bodily decay which we have examined as rising to prominence and coalescing in the 1946 novellas and subsequent work.

the last book, *L'Innomable*, there's complete disintegration. No 'I', no 'have', no 'being'. No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on.'¹⁹⁴ This is the point to which Beckett brings the novel and may be another area in which we can see it differs from deconstruction. Whereas deconstruction is a tool that is used on a variety of texts to reveal structural abnormalities inherent in their nature that then change our thinking on them and indeed, wider issues, there is a sense with Beckett that by the end of *The Unnamable* he has written himself into a corner. Where deconstructionists are often keen to stress the positive, exploratory nature of their work, in part due to accusations of nihilism or infinite relativism, as *The Unnamable* goes on it moves towards a smaller and smaller area of silence. It aims to finish by saying nothing and in this way is a closed system, which is in fact very counter-intuitive to a deconstructionist perspective. Franco Fanizza wrote 'And since there is not, rigorously, a beginning or end in Beckett's works, it seems to us that one can find his most significant word in the novel *récit The Unnamable*. In this work, we say, is contained his final (not in a chronological sense) "word".'¹⁹⁵ Despite Fanizza's assertion that, by virtue of the questions they are dealing with, Beckett's works have no end as such, he is correct that *The Unnamable* does not open up more possibilities, but rather fulfils and closes off a series of issues Beckett had been working on for years.

Joanne Shaw on the other hand argues along similar lines but with a much more positive outlook. Her historical interpretation is that after the holocaust Beckett had to represent the impotence of language and also its complicity in the face of the attendant destruction and horrors the world had witnessed. She argues there is a repurposing of propaganda techniques in the way he unmakes and then remakes the world. She repeatedly stresses

¹⁹⁴ John Fletcher, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 194.

¹⁹⁵ Franco Fanizza, 'The Word and Silence in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*', in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, ed. by J.D. O'Hara (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 74.

that the negativity inherent in *The Trilogy* may lead to an endpoint for Beckett's writing, but that it is a positive creative force and opens up possibilities, rather than restricting them. She writes 'What we can say is that Beckett's negative words neither finally make nor not-make; his and his characters' word negations leave an opening through which some kind of becoming may (or on the other hand, may not) occur.'¹⁹⁶ Shaw seems to be suggesting Beckett is a kind of pioneer; that his work leaves us at a point where someone else has had the necessary post-holocaust groundwork done for them and can begin where Beckett left off. This is certainly in keeping with the prescience of Beckett's writing we have been examining and is further evidence the work enacts elements of deconstruction.

It is also in keeping with Theodor Adorno's understanding of Beckett, which argues for Beckett as, above all, a moral writer concerned with how our understanding of the world changed after 1945. As Tyrus Miller puts it 'Adorno sought in his work of the sixties to illuminate the lingering presence of the war in 'post-war' society through the dark lens of Beckett's art.'¹⁹⁷ Adorno's writings on Beckett are in fact very small in number, with an essay on *Endgame* his most sustained work and several references made in works like *Negative Dialectics* (1966). Much in the way we are here exploring the relationship between Beckett and Derrida's work, Adorno saw Beckett's fiction as directly concerned with many of the issues he was trying to articulate through his philosophy. We need not get into the intricacies of this philosophy now, especially considering the complexities of Adorno's reconfiguring of mimesis from its traditional, Aristotelian base however Miller summarizes his position quite succinctly, writing

...in the *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno stresses Beckett's figuring of the contemporary situation of subjectivity, a situation characterised in his view by dehumanization, loss of

196 Joanne Shaw, *Impotence and Making in Samuel Beckett's Trilogy* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), p. 116.

197 Tyrus Miller, 'Dismantling authenticity: Beckett, Adorno, and the 'postwar'', *Textual Practice*, 8:1 (1994), pp. 43-57. (p. 44.)

individuation, and mimetic adaptation to the historical horizon of war and its aftermath.¹⁹⁸

This is particularly interesting in relation to the central question of this chapter, i.e. is *The Unnamable* a deconstructionist work? It could be argued that in focussing upon this we are indulging in the abstract, where in fact these works are concerned with how the individual can live in the years following The Second World War. Adorno writes that

But from that zero point where Beckett's prose works unfold their essence... a second world springs up, both sad and rich, a concentration of historical experiences, which in its immediate non-artistic form would not reveal the hollowing out of the subject and reality. The shabbiness and damaged character of the image-world is the negative print of the administered world. In this respect, Beckett is a realist.¹⁹⁹

Adorno's argument is similar in some respects to the illustrative method I have described as essential to how Beckett's novels function throughout this thesis. He is describing the world Beckett creates as a distorted mirror image of our own existence, but rather than this reflection highlighting the problems with unknowability and ineffability that I have focussed upon, Adorno sees Beckett's concern as primarily historical. However, I do not see Adorno's approach as incompatible with my own, or as superseding the more abstract concerns of Derrida. Rather, there is room for both. Beckett's post-war work is no doubt a product of his experiences during it and the permanently changed face of the world. However, it is also deeply concerned with how we can actually address these issues and problems in received modes of philosophical or theological approaches to the most fundamental questions of existence. Indeed, in the wake of such horrific events as The Holocaust these modes are exposed for just how insufficient they are in addressing the modern world. Perhaps what Shaw and Adorno's readings most keenly make us aware of is not losing the context of Beckett's concern with problems of structure and the issues of violence, cruelty and lack of agency that we have explored as central to his work.

¹⁹⁸ Miller, p. 48.

¹⁹⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by C. Lenhardt, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 45-46.

Returning to the opening of the novel, before introducing the other characters revolving around him The Unnamable says 'I shall have company. In the beginning. A few puppets. Then I'll scatter them, to the winds, if I can... The thing to avoid, I don't know why, is the spirit of system.' (TU, p. 286.) *The Unnamable* is a novel that evolves and progresses as it unfolds. We can see here it in fact declares how it will progress; initially reliant on a stable base of past avatars that it will discard as it moves into the main body of the text, a new kind of narrative that through its method enacts a rejection of any assumed hierarchical structure. Like *Malone Dies* it uses illustrative means, but also reaches beyond these to an active mode that does not merely reflect, but performs. The narrative mode, aware of its own redundancies as it is, is also an example of the kind of "play" we have examined in the previous chapter and grasps at something larger. In speaking of the solution to the failures in structural thinking Derrida claims

The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or on ontotheology – in other words, throughout his entire history – has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.²⁰⁰

In deconstruction play is conceiving structurality which does not rest on a hierarchical base, but that accepts unanchored relations not dependent on an emotional yearning for full presence. I would argue this is what the narrative method of *The Unnamable* enacts. The restless, sprawling network of content is in play. It resists the authority of any single aspect over another and in this aims for something greater than the sum of its parts. As Derrida writes 'Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of absence and presence.'²⁰¹ The latter cannot be enacted through language. It can be conceived, but as we have examined,

²⁰⁰ Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play', pp. 369-370.

²⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 389.

any utterance participates in the illusion of absence and presence that is the basis for language as it has been constructed. *The Unnamable* offers the former. I am not trying to argue the statements he makes only contain meaning in their “playful” relationship, but rather that as well as their own meaning the play they enact aims at a state where absence and presence would not be the only tools we have to move beyond traditional structure.

To argue *The Unnamable* is a deconstructionist novel is not as reductive and forced as one may be inclined to think. Although we may not agree with the certainty Paul Stewart expresses when he writes, 'Beckett can be seen to practice deconstruction in his own works, attacking the ruling metaphors of Western thought and literature, questioning the unity of the subject'²⁰², there are certainly aspects of Beckett and Derrida's practice which seem to achieve the same aims. We have examined how the novel evolves as it progresses into a narrative mode that enacts many concepts central to deconstruction such as the trace, the chain, presence and play. We have also seen that in some respects, such as *The Unnamable*'s quest for a final definitive silence, the novel actually renders itself inert to the fluidity of deconstruction. It is not an argument that this thesis pursues, but critics like Daniel Katz have argued that Beckett's reworking of the monologue within *The Trilogy* is doing many of the same things to Molly Bloom's monologue in *Ulysses* that Derrida would attempt some years later.²⁰³ In the first chapter of this thesis I argued against John Calder who wrote that 'what future generations can expect to find in his work is above all an ethical and philosophical message; the novels and plays will increasingly be seen as the wrapping for that message.'²⁰⁴ I have not changed this opinion. I still believe that Beckett's work is primarily art and can and should not be seen as an embodiment of any

202 Paul Stewart, p. 158.

203 'In these ways, the trilogy's rendering of “monologue” seems, in many aspects, to explicitly work through certain aspects that Jacques Derrida explores through a reading of a “monologue” of obvious centrality for Beckett that of Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*.' Daniel Katz, *Saying “I” No More* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 107.

204 John Calder, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder Publications, 2001), p. 1.

philosophical school, even one like deconstruction that seems to attack the roots of metaphysics as much as his work does. In this thesis I have tried to chart the development of Beckett's prose output from the philosophical bricolage of *Murphy*, the establishment of his own critical voice in *Watt*, the postwar solidification of his key concerns in the 1946 novellas, right through to the most experimental and philosophically active work that comes in The Trilogy. I have already written in this chapter that in *The Unnamable* Beckett, to an extent, writes himself into a corner. This is however not an accusation of failure levelled at Beckett's project. Indeed, it is difficult to even argue he had a project in the early works, writing mostly in response to the greats who had shaped his thinking as a young man. By his own admission however²⁰⁵, he was clearly working at refining a mode of writing in his postwar prose. This last work of The Trilogy is the completion of that evolutionary process and if we look at the negation we have traced and Beckett saw as essential to understanding his work then this relinquishing silence was an inevitability; the fulfilment of a process that had become intrinsic to his writing and lead the fundamental concerns of his writing into increasingly withdrawn areas.

This, as far as I am concerned, is the final question The Trilogy leaves us with. At the start of the chapter one of the things I sought to discover was that, if indeed *The Unnamable* was a deconstructive novel, what were the ramifications for this in viewing Beckett's body of prose works as a whole? Even though I have suggested the novel only enacts certain deconstructive techniques, whilst rejecting others, the progress these works have made towards a relentless experimentalism still brings out some interesting issues. Reading a work like *The Unnamable* in isolation from the rest of Beckett's work one would certainly

205 I refer here, as I have done in previous chapters to Beckett's characterising of his own work as the opposite of Joyce's: 'I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.' James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 134.

get an idea of the issues that have concerned him, but in truth one needs to be aware of the previous novels in order to understand not only the nuances of his thinking, but also the impetus which led him away from accessible writing and made the even barer speaking voice of *How It is* the only final move available. What of the notion that the sacrifices Beckett makes in achieving the formal innovations of the later prose works are unworthy of the final product? It could be argued that in the 1946 novellas and *Molloy* in particular there is a balance which is lacking from *The Unnamable*. These earlier works are accessible and humorous, illustrating Beckett's reactions to a history of metaphysical problems and at times being formally innovative enough to presciently enact elements of poststructuralist method. The later works on the other hand are staggering in their conception and of course revolutionary in pushing at the very limits of what can be done with literature. However, as argued already in this chapter, at no point can one escape the incumbent restrictions of language and its limitations as a vehicle. This final silence may gesture towards a means beyond traditional structural thinking, but it can never truly escape it. In this case it is not without some legitimacy that one can argue the final prose works abandon many of the best elements of the early works and indeed speak to greater and greater degrees to themselves. This is of course a wider question of art in general and one encompassing far more than the prose works of Samuel Beckett. I do believe however that the question of the declining worth of Beckett's work to a wider audience as it progresses is one that we should not ignore and that should occupy a more equal place with the more analytical issues at the core of this body of work.

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